

Glen Svensson: The Wisdom of Emptiness-2016-NewYork-SMC

Good evening everyone, and welcome to Shantideva, and welcome to this session titled: The Wisdom of Emptiness.

Of course, this is one of the modules in the discovering Buddhism program. So I think we've got two hours. So, what I'm planning to do is: in the first hour or so, have a discussion about emptiness, have a short break then in the middle, and then after the break do a little emptiness meditation. So we sort of get into the practice a little bit, then a little bit more discussion about emptiness, and then some general Q and A at the end.

But in general, I like my sessions to be very interactive. So you don't have to keep all your questions to the end. If you have any questions about the material we're covering, you can ask at any time. And we'll answer questions as we go as well. Or if you have more general questions you can leave them to the end.

Okay. So, let's start. What is emptiness? This emptiness here, this wisdom of emptiness is coming from Sanskrit word. Sanskrit word is 'Shunyata'. And emptiness is describing the nature of reality. And basically, the word emptiness is saying that everything is empty of independent existence, meaning nothing exists independently. So, why is it that we need to cultivate this wisdom of emptiness? Why is it so important?

And the reason is - that is that the Buddhist assertion, of course - is that it's our distorted view of reality that is at the root of our mental afflictions and suffering. So, if we want to overcome mental afflictions and suffering, we need to overcome this distorted view of reality. And as we are going to shortly see, it's our distorted view of reality, that leads to mental afflictions such as attachment and aversion, which is driving our behaviour. And that's leading to our experiences. And often we have experiences of suffering. Now, in terms of distorted view of reality, there are a number of distorted views that we can have. And so I've listed a few of these here.

The first is a distorted view that there are unchanging things. Now, of course, I think all of us intellectually accept the idea of impermanence, that things are changing moment by moment. Science has proven it, we learned it at school, I think none of us have any issue about the fact that things are changing moment by moment. But here, when we talk about distorted views, we're talking about not so much intellectual view, but how we instinctively see reality. And I think all of us, or most of us, at least instinctively see things as unchanging, that this cup is more or less the same cup that was here yesterday, it'll be the same cup here tomorrow. That's how we relate to things instinctively.

So even though intellectually, we may have the correct view, that things are changing moment by moment, that's not our instinctive behaviour. That instinctively we see things as quite unchanging. Another distorted view is the view that pleasure equals happiness. So normally, we equate pleasure with happiness. So if we want to strive for happiness, often, we're trying to simply get more pleasure. And of course, as we all understand, more pleasure doesn't mean more happiness. Often it can lead to more suffering.

Another distorted view is this idea of an autonomous self, that we over inflate the sense of me. And we believe that this is sort of autonomous, self sufficient me here.

And because we have this overinflated false sense of me, we then relate to things in our experience in a distorted way. And then that leads to a lot of problems and difficulties. And then finally, we have also this distorted view of grasping onto independent me, independent world. There seems to be an independent me here and an independent world there. And we grasp on to this fact that there is an independent me, an independent world here.

And this is the distorted view that we're looking at this evening. And this is what this wisdom of emptiness is targeting. That emptiness is the realisation that there is no independent me, no independent world. So this is the one we're focusing on this evening. So, okay, so far? Now, what I'd like to do first is try to understand how this distorted view, how grasping onto independent me and independent world, how is that leading to mental afflictions and suffering? Why is that the root cause of all of our suffering.

So, for that I have a little diagram here. And I think Charlotte's got some, a couple of copies of that you can share, I think we've got maybe 10 copies or so of this chart, you can look at, but I'll put it all on the flip chart here anyway. So let's have a look at how this grasping onto independent me, independent world, how is that the root of all of our suffering?

So step one of the process, we have what's called seed of ignorance. And ignorance, in general is a mind, it's a mind that is confused about its object. And here, this ignorance is this grasping onto independent me, independent world. Grasping onto everything existing independently. And 'seed' means habit. So we all have the habit of grasping onto independent me, independent world. And we've had that habit since we were born. And according to Buddhism, well before we were born, we had that happened.

When we look out on the world, everything appears to us to exist independent of us. So another way of saying that is that: we have this dualistic appearance, there seems to be subject-object duality, there seems to be independent me, independent world. That's how things appear to us. But this view of emptiness is saying, things are not existing as they appear.

So hence this is what's called 'mistaken dualistic appearance', that things are mistakenly appearing to us as if they exist independent of us. And in fact, everything that appears to us appears to us in this way. And because we have the habit of believing these appearances, we never question appearances, because we've never seen the world in any other way. And if we ask anyone else, they'll also agree with us: "Yes, the world appears to exist independent of me". So there's no reason to question appearances. So we never do.

We automatically accept appearances, which is step two, ignorance. So step two is simply believing and grasping onto independent me, independent world. Now in every one of our experiences, we have this mental factor of "feeling" operate. And this word "feeling" in Buddhism doesn't mean emotion.

Often when we speak generally, when we say we talk about feelings, we're talking about emotions. But in Buddhist psychology, 'feeling' does not mean emotion. Feeling is simply a mental factor that experiences things as either pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. And neutral just means neither pleasant nor unpleasant.

So let's say we're looking at this cup. So this cup appears to exist independent of us, we have the habit of believing that. So we automatically accept: 'yes, that cup exists independent of me there on the table'. And let's say when we're looking at this cup, we're having a pleasant experience. That pleasant experience, together with the belief that that cup is existing independently of me, will lead to the third step, which is a misconception. Because if I'm having a pleasant experience, when I see this cup, and I believe that that cup is existing independent of me, then of course, I'm naturally going to assume there must be some attractive quality there, that's causing my pleasant experience. So I see that cup as inherently attractive.

Or if I'm having an unpleasant experience, when I see this cup, together with the belief that this cup is existing independent of me, I'm naturally going to assume there must be some unattractive quality there that's causing my unpleasant experience. So I'll see it as inherently unattractive. Or if I'm having a neutral experience, I'll simply see it as inherently neutral, there must be some neutral qualities there causing my neutral experience. So when we get to the third step, the fourth step easily follows.

Because again, let's say we're looking at this cup, we're having a pleasant experience, then, and we're seeing it as inherently attractive. I like pleasant experiences, I want pleasant experiences, that cup seems to be causing my pleasant experiences, I want that cup! - attachment. Or if I'm having an unpleasant experience, I don't like unpleasant experiences, I don't want unpleasant experiences, that cup seems to be causing my unpleasant experience, get it out of here! Aversion. Or if I'm having a neutral experience, that will simply reinforce my belief that that cup exists independent of me, which of course, is ignorance.

But here, often we see the word "confusion". Which is simply another word for ignorance. So confusion here doesn't mean: "Is that a cup or not?" It's confused about how it exists. So confusion is simply another word for ignorance. It is reinforcing my belief: this cup is existing independent of me. So once we get to the fourth step, then these are the mental afflictions that are driving our behaviour, and all other mental afflictions come out of one of those or a combination of them. So this is what's driving our behaviour.

And every action we do, motivated by mental affliction, has consequence, has a result. And the Buddhist assertion is that all of our actions motivated by mental afflictions, lead to our experiences. And our experiences collectively, were described by the Buddha, in the Four Noble Truths. The first noble truth using the word "dukkha", often translated as suffering. So this is how our distorted view of reality at grasping on to independent me, independent world leads to our mental afflictions. Now suffer. Any questions about that anything that is not clear? No questions? Really? Okay.

So therefore, if we want to overcome suffering, or the Sanskrit word '*dukkha*' we have to go back to the source. So we have to eliminate ignorance. If we eliminate ignorance, ie. grasping on to independent me, independent world, we will overcome misconceptions, mental afflictions, and the suffering they produce. So this is how we can be liberated from suffering, how we can achieve liberation, we can achieve this goal of *Nirvana*.

So let's now have a look at how we can establish this view of emptiness, how do we go about establishing the view of emptiness and coming to realise emptiness to overcome this ignorance? So let's look at that now. One other thing before we move on: here is, if we're looking at this cup, and we're having a pleasant experience, and we see this cup as beautiful. Where is the beauty? Is the beauty there in the cup? Because if the beauty was there in the cup, it would mean that everyone who looked at that cup would have to see this beautiful, assuming they got clear vision. But if the beauty is there, then everyone must see it as beautiful. But we all know from our own experience, this is not the case.

So, another way of understanding emptiness in this case, in this context, is the idea that 'beauty is in the eye of the beholder'. You know, we often hear that. So this is in line with this view of emptiness. But of course, we're not just fabricating the beauty, are we? We're not just making it up. But the beauty is only coming from our experience of the cup, is not coming from the cup. Because we're having a pleasant experience, we interpret that experience, that object as beautiful. This is a way of understanding emptiness. Which means, now of course, when we see things as beautiful, and we believe that they're the source of our happiness, we have craving and attachment for them. But if we realised emptiness or in other words, if we realise beauty is in the eye of the beholder, what's there to grasp?

Does that mean things won't be beautiful anymore? No, it means we will correctly understand the beauty, which means we won't have any craving or attachment. Which actually means we will enjoy pleasurable experiences much more than we do now. Because often people feel: by realising this emptiness thing, all my life is going to be bland and boring. Exact opposite! It's our craving and attachment, which interferes with our enjoyment of pleasurable experiences. And we know that from our own experience, when we have a lot of craving attachment, it very much agitates the mind. And if we don't get that pleasurable thing, we get frustrated, if we get it, we often overindulge and create suffering. It never really fully satisfies, that we end up craving more, more, more, we get dissatisfaction, disappointment when it doesn't live up to our expectations. So actually craving attachment, destroys our enjoyment of pleasurable experiences. If we realise emptiness, will enjoy pleasurable experiences much, much more than we do now. The excitement of it.

So let's have a look at how we established this view of emptiness. So now we're saying that we grasp on to independent me, independent world. So we're talking about independent existence, we believe in things existing independently. In the text there's a number of terms describing this.. Probably the most common term you'll see is '*inherent existence*'.

So inherent existence, as the idea of things being self existent, that things exist, by way of their own unique nature, that the world is divided up into many separate discrete things, each one having its own unique nature, self existent. Another term that's commonly used is '*existing from its own side*'. And this has the idea of things simply existing from their own side, meaning that they don't need an observer for them to exist, they simply exist from their own side. So this has the idea that the world is already out there existing, waiting for us to come along to confirm that. And then there's another word '*true existence*'. And true existence, generally, the word "true" in our language, English language, something is true if it doesn't deceive us.

Now, things appear to exist independent of us. And if things really exist in that way, they would be true, meaning: they're not deceiving us. So, true existence means: existing in the same way in which it appears. Things appear to exist independent of us, if they actually existed in that way, that would be true. Meaning: the way in which they appear (and) the way in which they exist, match. So, these are three terms describing independent existence, each one from a slightly different perspective, but they all mean the same thing. And so, this is what we are grasping on to now, that there is an independent me here, independent world there.

But what this view of emptiness is saying is that things are empty of inherent existence. Or in other words: things are not independently existent. Why? Because, they are dependently existent. The word that is "*dependent arising*". 'Arising' here means: coming into existence. So things come into existence dependently. So this phrase here, "empty of inherent existence", this is emptiness. So emptiness again, is the fact that things are empty of inherent existence, or in other words, they lack inherent existence, they're not independently existent.

So emptiness doesn't mean nothing really exists. Emptiness simply means: nothing exists independently. Why? Because everything is dependently existent. The technical word for that is that they are dependent arisings. So if we can appreciate how things exist dependently, then we can have a better understanding of emptiness, what it means for them to not be independent.

So let's have a look now briefly at how things exist dependently. How do things come into existence dependently. Any questions so far? Anytime you have a question, just put your hand up and I answer it. So we can talk about things existing dependently in three ways. Things exist depending on causes and conditions. This laptop, for example, exists depending on causes and conditions. One of the first conditions necessary, of course, someone needs to think about designing this laptop. And then also, then of course all the raw materials needed to be gathered, those raw materials needed to be refined, the various components needed to be manufactured, assembled, and then all the people in factories involved in the process also necessary. So all of those things were necessary for us to have this laptop here today. So I think that's quite straightforward.

But also, things exist depending on their parts. Again, this laptop exists depending on its parts, without the metal casing, the screen, the keyboard, electronic components, the battery, without all of these parts there would be no laptop. So again, fairly straightforward. So I think most of us could appreciate these two, without too much difficulty. But remember, what we're saying is: the fact that things exist dependently, should be overturning the fact that they are independent.

Yet, I think most of us can quite happily accept that this laptop exists depending on causes and conditions, on its parts, yet at the same time, I think most of us here are quite happy to accept that when we walk in that door, there's already a laptop here existing on the table. Am I true? Is that true? That shouldn't be possible, according to this logic, because they can't be, something can't be dependent and independent. They're mutually exclusive. So the fact that things are dependent should be overturning the idea that they're independent. But that doesn't seem to be happening.

I mean, we can quite happily accept, this laptop exists dependent on causes and conditions and parts, yet I think for most of us here, quite happily accept that there's already a laptop existing here on the table when we walk in the door. Why isn't that possible? Because they are contradictory! Those two ideas. The reason is, we only understand these two ideas at a very superficial level. To understand these two at the deeper level, we have to go to the third way in which things exist dependently. And that is: things exist depending on labelling, imputation, conception, designation. These four words, all mean the same thing. So if you understand one of those words, you understand all four.. So what does it mean for things to exist depending on labelling, imputation, conception or designation?

And again, when we look at that, we go: "I know what that means, there's a thing on the table here, we're calling it a laptop". Again, very superficial understanding of this third point. To understand this at a deeper level, we can appreciate actually, that when we look out on the world, we're just receiving a mass of sense data, particularly visual data. And we have to make sense or meaning out of all this data, otherwise, we couldn't function. So what do we do? We create objects. Out of all of this data, we draw lines around various collections of data. And we create an object, to make meaningful objects out of all of this data. If we didn't do that we couldn't function.

But we do more than that. Because we're living in this world, not in isolation. With others. So in order to be able to communicate with others, we have to give names to the things that we've created. So that's what we mean by labelling, imputation, conception designation. And how we divide up all of this data, how we draw lines is completely arbitrary. It's not fixed. It's completely arbitrary, depending on the context and the meaning that we want to get out of what we see. For example: how many things are there? How many?

Probably, most commonly we would draw one line around all of that data and create one thing and call it a star. Usually, probably most often, that would be the most meaningful thing. But maybe in another context, its more meaningful to draw two lines and create two triangles. Or in other contexts, we could draw six lines inside the six triangles, or six triangles and a hexagon. Or we could simply say: there's a collection of 18 lines there. So is there one, two, six, seven or 18 objects there? How many things are there?

We decide! We create the star, we create the two triangles and so forth. There is no star there existing from its own side, independent of our conceptual framework.

So what we have here is a couple of terms. We often hear that '*things are not findable*'. Meaning, you cannot find the star there in the basis, from its own side. Because the star only exists within our conceptual framework. Another term you'll often see is '*things are merely labeled*'. Again 'merely' means "only", "just" - meaning: there is no star to be found there. The star only exists within our conceptual framework, its merely labeled. It does not exist in the basis from its own side.

Clear so far? Any questions?

Student: So, with respect... (rest of question inaudible).

Glen: Of course, the real interesting question is: who's the me that's coming into the room? Which we're going to talk about after the break.

Student: (question inaudible)

Glen: Sure, fine. Again, so "sense of me". So, again, this 'time-objective', I mean, even physics has proven (that) there's no such thing as objective time. Certainly, from a Buddhist perspective there is no such thing as objective time. Again, time is a concept that we have created to help us explain all of these. To explain the flow, the change, exactly. But it's a useful concept. It helps us to function.

Very good. Anything else?

Okay. Let's now go back to these two points, based on this understanding and see if we can understand these two ideas at a deeper level. So we said that things exist depending on causes and conditions. So this is a timeline, this is a seed, and this is the plant that it produces. So the plant exists depending on causes and conditions. The underlying cause is what's called: '*substantial cause*' is the seed. Conditions of course, includes sunlight, water, fertiliser and so forth. So we need the cause, and all the conditions for the seed to become the plant.

Now we believe things exist independent of us, independent of our conceptual framework. If that's true, then it should be a fixed, obvious point, at where the seed becomes the plant. So where, in this process does the seed become the plant? At what point is the seed becoming the plant, who can tell them? Where, in the timeline?

Student: Where you say so.

Glen: Exactly! The seed becomes the plant at the point where this configuration of data stops looking like our concept of seed and starts looking like our concept of plant. And we all have slightly different concepts of what a seed and the plant is. So for some of us, this is already a plant. For some of us, that will be here, here, here. We decide when the plant comes into existence. Not from its own side.

Here's another point: The seed and the plant are in a cause and effect relationship. By definition, if two things are in a cause and effect relationship, they cannot exist simultaneously. Correct? If two things are in a cause and effect relationship, by definition, they cannot exist simultaneously. So the seed and the plant are in a cause and effect relationship. Here's the question: Think about it! Does the seed stop existing before the plant comes into existence? So don't let it out! Think about it. There's only two answers: yes or no. Does the seed stop existing before the plant comes into existence? Yes or no? Which is it? Does the seed stop existing, before the plant comes into existence? Yes or no?

Student: (inaudible)

Glen: No, no, not depending.

Student: (inaudible)

Glen: If you say no, that means they're existing simultaneously, which by definition is illogical, so no is illogical. If you say yes, then the seed has ceased to exist. Where is the plant coming from? Yes is illogical, so both: no and yes are illogical. And they're illogical because the basis that we are asking this question is, that things exist independently. Which means our assumption is illogical.

And *Nagarjuna*, great Indian master from second century, had his classic text on emptiness called '*Mula-Madhyamika-Karika*', *Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle-Way*, he has 27 chapters of these sorts of arguments. He says: "You believe in independent existence? What about the seed and the plant? What about fire and fuel, agent in action? How do these things work?" They can't work. Which means, our basic fundamental premise or belief that things exist independently is actually completely illogical. It cannot be true.

Here's another point: We say that the plant exists depending on the seed, or in other words, the result depends on the cause. But this view of emptiness is saying: also, the cause depends on the result. How does the cause depend on the result? How does the seed depend on the plant?

Student: (inaudible)

Glen: No, it's true. But that's not the answer.

Student: I mean, our label of it determines its final function.

Glen: Exactly, you can't call something a cause unless you have the idea resolved. You can't call something a seed, unless you have the idea of a plant. Whether or not it produces it, is irrelevant. So cause can only exist depending on result, seed can only exist depending on the plant.

Here's another point: We say that also things exist depending on their parts. Pen. The pen exists depending on its parts. But can you find a pen here? In the basis? Is a pen findable here?

Is that a pen? No? This little metallic thing? No? This thing? No. This. Is that a pen? No. Is the plastic tube a pen? No. Is the ink inside, a pen? Is the round ball on the end the pen? No. This other piece of metal a pen? No. Where's the pen? And people go: "Ah that's easy. It's the collection of the parts".

Here we go. It's a collection. Oh, no, no, no, no, no, in a certain shape. So you have to tell me where the pen comes into existence, okay?

Not very good at putting back....

So again, when does the pen come into existence? Its when this configuration of data closely enough resembles our concept of pen. And generally, our concepts have at least two parts: appearance and functionality. So when this appears closely enough to our idea of pen, and seems to function according to our idea of pen, then there's a pen. There is no pen existing there from its own side, independent of our conceptual framework.

Because if there was a pen existing there, from its own side, independent of our conceptual framework, it would mean if a caveman walked in the door, they would see a pen and they start writing with it. Maybe a caveman would see some sort of weapon to stab things with. And if a dog came in the door, they may see some sort of chewing stick, or if a tiny and came here they may see some sort of home to live in. So is this a pen a weapon a chewing stick or a home? From its own side, none of those things. From the side of the observer, all of those things.

We bring the pen into existence, there is no pen existing there, independent of our conceptual framework. And we say the pen exists depending on its parts. Here's a big point: If we can understand this, these two statements are not saying the same thing, we're beginning to understand something about emptiness.

The two statements are: this is a pen. Or in other words: the pen is the collection of the parts. Versus: the pen is '*merely labeled*', depending on the collection of the parts. Again, the two statements are: the pen is the collection of the parts, or in other words: this is a pen. Versus: the pen is merely labeled, depending on the collection of the parts. If we can understand those two statements are not saying the same thing, we're beginning to understand something about emptiness.

One more point: We're saying that the pen depends on its parts. Or in other words: the whole depends on the parts. But also, here, this view of emptiness is saying: the parts depend on the whole. Again, the same reason: You can only call something a part of a pen if you have the idea of pen. Whether or not the pen exists is irrelevant. So the part depends on whole, whole depends on part.

Any questions?

Student: I'm curious about the difference between the cause and condition. It seems like there's a hierarchy between creator, a distinction, that I'm not exactly sure....

Glen: Yeah, when we talk about causes and conditions, the word 'cause' means: substantial cause. And substantial cause is the thing that transforms into the result. So the substantial cause of the plant is the seed, the substantial cause of a material object is the material matter, that becomes the object. And all the conditions were all the other factors that were necessary for that transformation to take place. So that's the sort of distinction.

Student: Sorry, I just sort of want to push a little bit on this. I mean, you can also argue that the soil becomes the plant. And you can also argue that the soil, that the that the sky becomes the plant, because of synthesis, because of oxygen and carbon dioxide and all sorts of other things. They were the conditions that enabled the transformation. So it seems as if there's a...., It seems as if there's a distinction drawn on the nature of a cause as opposed to the condition.

Glen: At a general level, yes. I mean, again, if you go down to fine details, then sometimes, of course, you know, we can talk about the seed transforming into the plant, but then of course, part of the nutrients from the soil come into that transformation. So again, causes and conditions are useful concepts to understand the process.

And so you know, as long as we keep it within that framework of usefulness, then it's useful. It's just useful. Yeah, exactly. Is there something in the seed that makes it a cause? From its own side? No. But again, it's a useful concept, like: time, like laptop, like star, these are useful concepts to help us to understand things.

Student: I think, when you're trying to say that things are, are not independent, dependent on everything. And so because of the sky, there is a seed, so why aren't they, can't they... Why can't they be restructured or labeled in a label at sort of together? Why aren't they the same thing?

Glen: Well, then, I mean, they're not the same thing but we can say they have the same nature. But again, these concepts are useful because they help us to function. So we differentiate and distinguish and create things because it's useful and meaningful. If there's no use of meaning, then we can just let go of that, you know, we don't want to create concepts that don't have value or no meaning to us. Functionality is also a concept. But what we need to be careful of, and this is coming up very shortly, is: we're not saying that things don't exist. In fact, maybe I'll bring that in now.

We are now starting what's called the: '*two extremes*'. For us now there's only two possibilities:

Either there is an independent me and an independent world, or there's no me and no world. Because the only me that we're related to, the only world that we relate to, is this seemingly independent me, independent world.

And so this view of emptiness is the antidote to this extreme. That when we investigate and come to realise emptiness, to come to realise nothing exists independently. This is overturning this extreme.

For us though, now there's only really two possibilities. Either there is an independent me, independent world or there's no me and no world. So often what happens is when people start to investigate: - "how do I exist, how does the world exist?" and come to realise there's no independent me, no independent world.....

The most common way that people interpret that experience is: "there's no me, no world". So, often people just flip to the other extreme of non-existence or nihilism.

So this is one of the most common misinterpretations of the experience of emptiness. That, often people when they come to this experience of emptiness, they misinterpret that to mean nihilism: "There's no me, no world at all". Because, we don't see any other possibility. But this view of emptiness is trying to find the middle way between these two extremes. So if we are misinterpreting this experience of emptiness, to mean: "nothing really exists", the antidote to that is, to reflect on dependent arising.

In fact there is a me in a world and the me and the world exist dependently, depending on causes and conditions, parts, labelling.

Even sometimes people who seemingly have studied this and reflected on this for some years, sometimes when I hear people talking amongst themselves, who supposedly have a good understanding of emptiness; often I hear them saying things like: "oh, it doesn't matter because everything's empty".

This is completely the wrong understanding. It's a misunderstanding! This is just thinking that emptiness means nihilism. The correct understanding of emptiness is: because things are empty of independent existence, things can function, things matter. That's the correct understanding. Because things are empty, everything matters. And because everything functions, they must be empty of independent existence. That is the correct understanding, that is the *Middle-Way* view. Meaning: emptiness and dependent arising are two sides of a coin.

Now, they seem to be contradictory. Either there is a functioning world, or things are empty and nothing really exists. This, for us now seems to be contradictory. But the correct understanding and a measure that our emptiness practice is going well, is that emptiness, dependent arising or emptiness and a functioning world are two sides of a coin. Because if this clock exists from its own side, if it had a unique nature of being a clock, you couldn't create it, couldn't destroy it, it couldn't change, it couldn't function.

But because it doesn't have a unique nature from its own side of being a clock, therefore, you can create it, you can change it, you can destroy it, it can function. That is the measure of understanding emptiness, that emptiness is equivalent to a functioning world or dependent arising; two sides of the coin. That's the measure, and to quote from *Nagarjuna*, who I talked about before, from the second century. He says: "...that which arises dependently and relatedly is explained as being empty, and that which is empty is dependently designated. This is the middle way path". So this is the correct understanding of emptiness.

To help us understand emptiness, there are often a number of analogies used in the text. And of course, an analogy is something more simple to help us to understand something more profound. And here in the context of emptiness, there is one analogy that I find particularly helpful. And that is the analogy of a dream.

Now, in a dream, there appears to be a dream-me here, and there appears to be an independent dream-world out there. And then, in the dream if we see something pleasant, we have craving and attachment, we see something unpleasant, we have aversion, maybe fear, maybe sort of like a nightmare. We try to escape.

But if in the middle of the dream suddenly, we realise we're dreaming, meaning: we we're going to lucid-dream.... So we're still dreaming. But we realised now: "Oh, this is a dream", and we become lucid in the dream, then there will still appear to be an independent dream-me, there will still appear to be an independent dream-world out there. But because we are lucid now, we will directly know that these dream appearances are deceiving us.

Which means: if we are lucid in the dream it will become very difficult to have craving and attachment for pleasant experiences, it will become very difficult to have aversion or fear for unpleasant experiences. And we would enjoy the dream a hell of a lot more.

This view of emptiness is saying: our waking world is like a dream. Meaning: now in our waking world, there appears to be an independent me here, appears to be an independent world there. And when we see something pleasant we have craving and attachment, we see something unpleasant we have aversion, fear, anxiety, hatred and so forth, anger.

But if we become lucid in our waking state, by realising emptiness, there will still appear to be an independent me, there will still appear to be an independent world. But because we're lucid now, because we've realised emptiness, we will directly know that these appearances are deceiving us, we will never buy into them. Which means: it will become very difficult for us to have any craving and attachment to pleasant things, it will become very difficult to have any aversion to unpleasant things. And we will enjoy our waking world a lot, a lot more. So this is an analogy I find particularly helpful and useful.

One more point, and then it's time for a short break. So, I said that when we look out on the world, we receive a mass of sense data. And to be able to function, we have to make some sense or meaning out of all this stuff. So again, we draw lines around various collections of data, we create objects, and then we give them names.

And then that's helpful and useful, because we can function then. So there's no problem there, in fact, we have to do that. We have to draw lines and give names to be able to function. The problem comes, because we don't realise that's what we're doing. The problem comes because we believe the world is already divided up into many separate discrete things, independent of our conceptual mind. That's what we believe.

And we saw earlier in that chart, that false distorted view of grasping onto independent me, independent world leads to attachment to pleasant things, aversion to unpleasant things, and the whole mess starts from there. So what we do is, in fact we turn our lines that we draw into boundaries. We believe that the world is already made up of many boundaries, we believe that the world is made up of many separate discrete things.

And so this is the problem, is not realising that we are creating our world of experience by drawing lines and giving names. Because instinctively, it seems like the world is already divided up into many separate things. But as we saw, that belief in grasping onto independent me, independent world is the root of all of our suffering, mental afflictions and suffering. And the thing I want to briefly talk about after the break, is the interesting point is, you know, I talked about, you know, we believe that there is, when we walk in the door, there's already a laptop sitting here on the table.

And then often people in discussion go: "But, but, but if I walk out the room, there's still going to be a laptop on the table. Or if I'm not in the forest, this is still a tree, therefore, it makes a sound, doesn't it?"

Of course, the real question to ask here is: Who is the 'me' that's walking out the room? That's because if we - and most people ask this question with the assumption that there's an independent me walking out the room - if that's our assumption, if that's true, if there really is (an) independent me, of course, there's still a laptop sitting here on the table, when we you walk out the door. Because you're grasping onto independent me, then by default, there must be an independent world.

So the real question is, and that's what we're going to look at after the break: How do I exist? Is there really a me, an independent me walking out the door? That's what we're going to look at after the break.

First, let's take a short break.

We said in the earlier part of the session, that when we look out on the world, we receive this massive sense data. And we have to make some sense or meaning out of this, to be able to function. So we draw lines around various collections of data, and we create meaningful objects. Then we give them names so we can communicate. And we have to do this, if we don't do this, if we don't draw lines and create objects we can't..., its senseless, its meaningless. It's no... we can't function.

So again, there's no problem with this. The problem is: we don't realise that's what we're actually doing. It seems like the world is already divided up into many separate discrete things, already. And in most of our experiences, the very first line we draw is, we draw a line around here. And we create the '*experiencer*'.

Because there's single experience. And within single experience, there are two aspects: experiencer, experienced. And we need to distinguish those two aspects. Otherwise, we can't function.

I think a newborn baby can't even really do that. They don't know, they can't distinguish the experiencer from experience, so they can't really function. They have to learn how to do that. So we need to do that, we need to draw a line and create the experiencer as part of the experience.

But again, the problem is, we don't realise that's what's happening in every single experience. We turn this line into a boundary. We grasp on to and contract around the experiencer part of the experience. And we believe that there's an independent experiencer here from the beginning.

But this... and this is called '*self-grasping*', grasping onto 'independent me'. But this is completely irrational. Illogical.

And to highlight that, I can ask the question: Is this big? Is this big? So, big can't exist on its own, it can't exist independently. You can't have: big; and: small. They can only exist dependently.

Like that, you can only have up with down, in with out. Like that, you can only have experiencer with experienced. Subject with object. Me with not-me. Me can only exist relative to not-me. You can't have 'me' on its own. That's what we believe in, we grasp on to the 'me' part of experience. And we believe there's an independent me, here. That grasping onto independent me is exactly exactly like saying: "this is big". Completely illogical.

And so we are completely out of sync with reality. Because there's interdependent reality. You can only have experience with experienced, subject with object, me with not-me. But when we grasp onto and contract around the 'me' part of the experience, and believe that we're independent of the experienced, we're completely out of sync with reality. We are fighting and struggling against the interconnected nature of reality. And if we fight against reality, we suffer and lose and the people around us suffer and lose. And very often in most of our behaviour, we have quite strong self grasping. We often have the perspective: me going there, me saying this, me doing that, it's always me, me, me with the idea that it's an independent me doing and saying and going, and so forth.

So, we are very much fighting against reality. But sometimes in our behaviour, we don't have such strong self grasping. Particularly when we are more focused on the activity, rather than the agent, the me who's doing the activity. For example, when we're absorbed in reading a good book, we're absorbed in watching a good program on TV, we're absorbed in solving a problem at work. In those occasions, we're more focused on the activity than the me who's doing the activity. And we know from our own experience, in those occasions, things seem to flow quite well, time seems to go quite quickly.

Why? Because we're not fighting against reality so much. Because of our concentration, the level of grasping is a little bit reduced. So we're more in harmony, more in sync with reality. And this is very much exemplified in people who have developed a high level of focus in their activities. For example: professional musicians, professional athletes, who spent thousands of hours training in their activity. They've developed a high level of focus in their activity. So much so, that when they're doing the activity, they often report: "there was no sense of me, there was just the music playing, there was just a sporting activity happening". What they call: being in the 'flow state' or in 'the zone'.

Of course, what's happening there is, because of the high level of concentration, the grasping onto 'me' is very much reduced. Much more in harmony with reality. So, not only do they often report: there was no sense of a separate me, but they often report peak performance, optimum performance in that state. Why? Because they're not fighting against reality, they're much more in harmony with reality. But this is only due to increased level of concentration, meaning that temporarily self-grasping is a little bit dormant.

Here, in this practice of emptiness, the wisdom of emptiness, we're not talking about just making it a little bit dormant through concentration, we're talking about: eliminating it through wisdom. To come to realise there's no independent me, no independent world. So if we can realise there's no independent me, no independent world, let go of that self grasping altogether, we can be completely in harmony with reality. Not only peak performance, means: no mental afflictions, no suffering. And we can develop boundless love and compassion for others.

Because now, we have a sense: "there's me here" and then there, there's sort of a gap or distance or boundary. So to develop love, and compassion for others takes effort, not so easy. But if we realise through this wisdom of emptiness, we realise that there's no boundary between us and others, there's not even one single boundary in the entire universe, we can develop boundless love and compassion for others.

This is a measure that our emptiness practice is going quite deep. That if through our emptiness meditation, when we come out of that meditation we are spontaneously without intellectually thinking, we are more spontaneously connected, and more spontaneous, have love and compassion for everyone. Very good sign that we're really going very deep in our practice.

So that's what we're going to do now is, we're going to do an 'emptiness meditation'. And we're going to look for this me that seems to be here, there really does seem to be an independent me here. But is there in fact, an independent me here or not? So we're going to do a little practice and look for the independent me that seems to be here.

One piece of advice before we begin is: we are doing empirical search, we're going to be a good scientist. And empirically look, in direct observation. Is there an independent me here or not? What we don't want to do is: allow our intellectual mind to pollute that empirical investigation, because the intellectual mind will always come up with an answer. Because (of) the intellectual mind we all have some sort of idea of who we think we are, based on some sort of belief system. So, if we allow our intellectual mind to contaminate this investigation, the intellectual mind goes: "I know, I know, I know the answer".

And of course, if we've studied some Buddhist philosophy, the intellectual mind is: "I am the subtle stream of consciousness, I'm the subtle mental continuum, because I learned that in Buddhism, what goes from life to life, that's who I really am". Or if we've done some more New Age stuff, and we've learned that everything is just subtle vibrations and subtle energy, intellectual mind goes: "I know, I know, I'm just subtle vibrations, I'm subtle energy, that's me".

When we getting angry, are we identifying with subtle energy or subtle mental continuum as me? I don't think so. I don't think so. So we're not looking for some intellectual idea of: who we think we are. We're not being scientific, if we do that. We're just using our belief system to come up with some idea. So, we're not a good scientist if we do that. So, leave the intellectual mind out of this. And we're looking empirically in direct observation. Right. So let's do the practice. And then a little bit of comments afterwards.

(gong sound)

It is an act of loving kindness for yourself.

Allow your awareness to descend into the body.

And simply become aware of sensations throughout the body.

And if you notice any areas of tightness or tension in any part of the body, then use the out-breath, to relax and release that tightness or tension as best you can.

And then bring your awareness to the area of your face, softening and relaxing all the muscles in the face.

Mouth and jaw soft and relaxed and all the muscles around the eyes, soft and relaxed.

Rest by allowing the entire body to become completely relaxed, completely at ease.

And allow the breathing to settle into its natural rhythm.

Not trying to control or regulate the breath in any way.

Simply allowing it to flow naturally and effortlessly.

Relaxing more deeply, with each out-breath.

And with each out-breath, letting go of any thoughts that may have arisen.

Happily releasing them.

And simply allowing the mind to come to rest in the present moment.

Focusing on the sensations of the breath, throughout the body.

Wherever you can most easily notice any sensations associated with the breathing.

Now narrow your focus. And focus on the sensations of the breath in the area of the abdomen.

Focusing on the sensations of the rising and lowering of the abdomen as you breathe.

Tying your mind with a rope of mindfulness to the sensations of the breath in the area of the abdomen.

Now, do you have the sense that there is a "me" here, who is meditating?

And me who is trying to relax the body?

And a me who's trying to focus on the breath?

A me that seems to exist from its own side.

And doesn't seem to depend upon anything else to exist?

Do you have this experience?

Where is the me who is meditating?

Can the meditator be found anywhere?

First, thoroughly investigate the body. And look for the me who is meditating.

Is that me existing somewhere within the body?

Is the meditator somewhere inside the head?

Is the brain the me who is meditating?

Or is the brain simply something which I possess, something which me the meditator is using?

Is the whole body itself, is that the me who is meditating?

Or is the whole body itself simply something which I have, something which me the meditator who's trying to relax?

Can me the meditator be found anywhere within the mind?

So search thoroughly the mind and look for the me who is meditating.

Are any of the thoughts, emotions, concepts in the mind? Are any of these the me who is meditating?

Or are thoughts, emotions and concepts simply things which I have?

Things which me the meditator possesses?

Is the mind itself, is that the me who is meditating?

Or is the mind itself simply, something which I possess, something which me the meditator is using to focus on the breath?

Is the combination of the body and the mind, is that the me who's meditating here?

Or is the combination of the body and the mind simply two things which I possess, two things which me the meditator is trying to train?

Yet, other than the body in the mind, what else is there here?

If there's nothing more than the body in the mind here, then where is the me that possesses this body and mind, and is trying to train this body and mind?

Where is me the meditator?

If you can't find me, the meditator simply rest in the experience of not finding.

And even if you didn't find the me who is meditating, isn't there someone who's experiencing all of this?

So there is a me who is meditating.

But how can this me exist, if we don't seem to be able to find it?

The me exists as something merely labeled on the basis of the body that is sitting here and the mind that is focusing on the breath.

The merely labeled me is sitting here meditating.

And bring the meditation to a close.

I've got a few more things to talk about. But if there's anyone who has any questions about the practice, the meditation or anything we've talked about so far.....?

Student: (inaudible)

Glen: What we can draw from that, is the same as the pen example. You know, we say that the pen like everything, you know, normally what we do, is we say: "this is the pen". But that just sort of that sort of way of speaking, sort of solidifies our ignorance. Because if we want to be technically correct, we've got sort of a basis here of many parts. And on that basis, we're labelling pen, we're applying the label "pen" to the basis. Which is correct. So, correct technically would be: "pen is something we're labelling on this basis".

But if we use sort of the language, "this is a pen", that way of speaking sort of increases that ignorance or potentially does, by believing that the pen is to be found here in the basis. So if we can understand that, rather, the pen is dependent on its parts, and so similarly for person, the way you are talking is helpful, that the person is dependent on the body, dependent on the breathing dependent on the mind. That helps us to be more in line with the view of emptiness.

Student: (question inaudible)

Glen: Sure, and just like this pen will come to an end someday, that's okay. I mean, that's the idea of impermanence. But we're talking about: how we exist, or how the pen exists in the present moment. And the way you were talking there about the person: "I" depend on the breathing and "I" depend on the body, that's a very helpful way of thinking. And that is the 'me' that exists, the me, you know, we say: "this is me", as if the body is me, or the mind is me. And generally, our sense of me...

Student: (question inaudible)

Glen: My hair, or the air? I thought you said: "hair". Well, the air inside of our body. You know, we say: "this is me", don't worry, which includes everything inside of the....

But so, what we tend to do is: we tend to identify ourselves, either with the body, you know, we say "this is me", or we identify ourselves with mental content: our thoughts, emotions, memories. And so our sense of me is constantly being reinforced by body, and mental content. And we identify with one of those things as 'me'. And depending on the situation, we are either identify: "this is me", or "thoughts is me", "emotions me", but its always some part we identify as 'me'.

But of course, we are none of those things. Either we are the body or we have a body. You can't be something and have it. And we have a body, so we can't be the body. And either we are our mind or we have a mind. We have a mind. Either we are the thoughts or we have thoughts, we have thoughts. Either we are our emotions, or we have emotions. We have emotions. Either we are our personality, or we have a personality, we have a personality. These are all things which we have.

We have personality, we have thoughts, we have emotions, we have memories, we have habits, we have a body, we have a mind, therefore, they can't be us. If we have them, we can't be them.

Student: (inaudible)

Glen: The me, exactly! The pen has parts. There's a pen that has parts. Yeah, so the pen exists. But is the pen any of the parts? No. But there is a pen that has parts, isn't it? Similarly, there is a me that has a body and a mind. But is the body in the mind me? No! Just like the parts are not the pen, we are not the body and the mind. We have a body and a mind. The pen has parts, we have parts, we have a body and a mind. So, the me like the pen, is a dependent me. The pen is something merely labeled on the basis of the parts. Me is something merely labeled on the basis of the body and the mind. That's the me that exists, the dependent me, the me that exists depending on the body in mind. Can we find the me? Can we find a pen here? No.

But that 'not finding' doesn't mean there's no pen. Not finding means: there's no independent pen. There is a pen a dependent pen, which exists depending on its parts, and therefore it's not findable in the parts. The person is a dependent person, that's not findable because it exists depending on the body and the mind, it's not the body and the mind. That's the me that exists.

Student: (question inaudible)

Glen: Why? Why is it? It's in your brain? Do you have a brain? Or are you the brain?

Student: The brain is....

Glen: Is it? Oh, so the brain is not me, then. Remember, if we say: "I am the brain..." they are equivalent. Which means: every characteristic that I have, the brain must have. Because they're equivalent. How tall are you?

Student: (answer inaudible)

Glen: Is not that tall? Exactly! So, therefore the brain is not you, it can't be, because if two things are equivalent, they have to have all the same characteristics, otherwise, they're not the same. So this is sort of questions we can use.

Student: Why does it feel like that?

Glen: It feels like that, because one of the main reasons - well there's a couple of reasons - one of the main reasons is: most of our sense faculties are in this area. And so, we draw in most of our knowledge through sense faculties. So, we have this sense, that the 'me' must be somewhere behind the sense faculties here, because that's the dominant part of our

But then, of course, when we're talking emotions, which are usually not sense-based, they can be stimulated, it's more here or here, isn't it? So are we here or here or here, where are we?

Student: (inaudible)

Glen: And of course, sometimes our sense of self is very small. And then part of the body becomes an object, you know: "my leg". "I have a leg" - as like: as a me here, and there's a leg there. So depending on the context, we identify more or less of the body and the mind as me and then the rest, of course, is not me.

Student: So you're saying that....

Glen: What I'm saying is that.....

Student: You're, you're all of those....

Glen: No, we are none of those things. Yeah. The pen is none of those things, the pen is labeled depending on the parts, but the pen is none of those things, is it?

Student: No, that itself...

Glen: No, but it's none of those things, none of those things there is the pen. The pen is something labeled, depending on the collection of those things. Similarly, the 'me' is something labeled, depending on the body and the mind, so we're not the body and the mind. Just like the pen is not to be found there, in the basis, there's no me to be found here. Therefore, the me exist as a dependent me, something merely labeled on the body and the mind.

Student: Consciousness, there are times where it feels...

Glen: Exactly, and whenever we do that identification, we get into trouble or often get into trouble. We react to pleasant and unpleasant things with attachment and aversion. And we suffer because of that identification. No? I think you'll find: if we don't identify with any of those things, our experiences would be much more balanced, much less suffering. And we will enjoy our life a hell of a lot more. Any other questions?

Student: I am me in a colloquial way, when you're interacting with the world its also like, I guess kind of implementing the teaching, you're creating this new internal reality before you actually start the only me, and that seems to contract into how I was able to communicate certain experiences.....

Other student: (inaudible comment)

Glen: Yeah, I don't think we need to use, to have some sort of...., make up some different language. I think that we just need to be more conscious in how we use the words. That's all. I mean, we're not trying to generate some new language or anything. My suggestion is that we just need to be more aware of when we use words. You know, that, like when we talk about pen, that, you know, when we talk about a pen, we understand that the pen is something that we're attributing to this collection of stuff.

And that's useful and meaningful for us, you know, we don't have to walk around and say: "The merely labeled pen, give me the merely labeled pen". I mean, that's not going to be helpful, is it? Not just talking about, you know, we can use similar language, but understanding that it's actually language, and concepts. So the main point is: to understand that we create language, we create concepts, to make sense and to communicate, and to understand that. Then a lot of this grasping would drop away, because we understand, we're creating these concepts, which are useful concepts like pen and time and me and laptop and that, but if we can keep that understanding. But of course, the the thing is, that what we need to remember is: this view of emptiness is a realisation that there is no independent me or independent world. Or in other words: to realise there's no subject-object duality.

That doesn't mean we all become one big blob, of course. I mean, you know, often people talk about emptiness, the realisation of emptiness, "always-everything-one". No, of course not, because "one" is dualistic. You can only have one if there's two.

For example, big and small. Are they one? One means the same. Is big and small one? No. Now we believe they're two, we believe big and small. Yeah, intellectually, because we understand that's false, but that's how we experience. We relate to things as "big" and "small". So for us they're two, ie. dual, or me and you, dual.

A realisation of emptiness is not a realisation that everything is one, because one is still dualistic talk. All we can say is: things are not two. Yeah, not two. So, are big and small one? Are they one? Because one means identical, the same. Big and small and not one!

Me and you are not one. We're not two. So big and small and not two, meaning they're dependent. Another way of saying is that, they're dependent. Big and small are dependent, therefore they're not two. Two means: big and small. 'Not two' means: this.

So we have to be a little bit careful on that. And then one more thing I wanted to mention on that is: this is something of course, we cannot figure out intellectually. Because the source of the problem is the intellectual, dualistic mind. And as Einstein said: "You cannot solve a problem at the level it was created at".

No? And that's what unfortunately, people want to do. They want to figure it out. "I want to figure out emptiness, I want the answer". And the intellectual mind goes round and round and round and round and round and round, getting more and more frustrated. Because the answer is beyond the dualistic mind. And the intellectual mind only operates at the conceptual level.

So we have to go beyond that. So we have to, that's why we have to meditate because you can never.... I mean, you can get an idea intellectually, but to directly realise the nature reality, you cannot do that with the intellectual mind, it is impossible. Because the intellectual dualistic mind is the problem. So we have to go beyond that. So that's why we have to meditate like we did. And to come to this realisation: there's no "me" to be found. And that 'not-finding' - if we do it well enough - becomes a completely non-dualistic experience. In that experience there is no sense of 'me'. That's an experience of emptiness. That's a realisation of emptiness. So we're not going to be able to figure it out intellectually. We need to experience it directly.

Student: (question inaudible)

Glen: Oneness? Yes, oneness means: not mean same nature. So there's a difference between saying "everything's one", and "oneness". Oneness means: everything's the same nature of emptiness. So yes, there is me and you. And the 'Oneness' is the fact that we're all lacking independent existence. So what you can do is, we can say we have the same nature. So that's correct. But to say: we're all one, technically is, it's still dualistic talk, actually.

I think we got a couple of minutes, maybe one more question. Otherwise, we'll wrap it up. Okay, one more point. And then we'll finish. Like every practice, of course, practice has two parts. You know, sometimes I see Buddhist type people talking amongst themselves and one will say to the other: "When do you do your practice?" And the other one goes: "I do it every morning at 6.30 for an hour".

If this is our idea of practice, we're not going to get very far. Practice has two parts: meditation, and what we do for the rest of the day. If we diligently meditate every morning for an hour, but then we jump up and run around as we normally do.... What's going to sort of win out? I think the mindless running around is going to sort of negate any little progress we do in meditation.

So if we want to progress in any practice, (there are) two parts: meditating, internalise, and then integration into daily life. So for this emptiness, wisdom of emptiness, two parts: meditating as we did a little bit like what we did, look for the me. Can't find, hold that experience of 'not finding' as long as we can. And then to integrate into the day. This is often called 'illusory like emptiness, practice'. And what we are to do in daily life is based on our understanding and meditation on emptiness; is to question appearances.

Things really appear to exist independent of me, but based on my understanding of emptiness and my experience of emptiness meditation, things are not existing as they appear. And particularly useful: whenever we have either pleasant or unpleasant experiences in daily life: Check it out! If you have a pleasant experience, when you experience something, you can do one of two things. You can either look at the object: Where is the beauty in the object? Or 'where is the me' that is getting craving or attachment to that object? So you can use either of those.

Or similarly, if you have an unpleasant experience: where is the ugliness to be found in the object? Or where is the me that's getting upset or getting angry or getting irritated? If you use either of those approaches, you find your mental afflictions will dissipate, you won't react, and that'll feed back into the emptiness meditation. So this is very helpful to subdue mental afflictions and reactions in daily life, plus to feed back into the emptiness practice. So, very important if we want our emptiness practice to progress: to meditate and integrate, like at any practice; meditate, integrate. Okay? I think we've run out of time there. So I'd like to thank **Shantideva Center** for inviting me along here and I hope to come back again in the not too distant future. And hopefully next time we can plan something a bit more longer term, a weekend or something. And last thing is that I have a website.

Glensvensson.org that I throw a lot of audio and materials and also my schedule on there. So whatever you find of any use on there, help yourself. And also there's a contact page on there. So if you want to ask me any question at any point, just send me a message.

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