

Introduction to the concept of emptiness as a basis for a techno-spiritual design

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The amount of people suffering from chronic diseases like diabetes has increased by over 300 million since 1980¹. Humans are living longer but the amount of healthy years doesn't increase². Old people feel their life is completed but they must continue to live. And in the end death awaits us all. On top of that there are many subtle and less subtle forms of modern suffering. We might have too much of things: tempting food and social media messages. Or too little: time³ and moments of quiet and solitude. Youngsters may have hundreds of Facebook friends and still feel lonely or depressed⁴. Almost 800000 people every year feel they can't bear the burdens of life anymore and take their own lives⁵.

We also see an increasing interest in spiritual practices like yoga and meditation (Tainya, 2018). It helps people to relax and find some peace in their busy, stressful lives. I think this is an important and valuable development which has been shown to increase well-being⁶. But in my opinion this only scratches the surface and doesn't go to the root of the problem.

In this essay I want to explore what is meant by emptiness in Buddhist theory and how this concept can be applied to all material and immaterial phenomena. I will explain how deeply understanding of this concept may lead to the end of suffering. I will briefly introduce the wisdom interventions I intent to design and explain how they might make this abstract concept of emptiness tangible and accessible. This essay therefore is written as an exercise: I want to get a firm grip on the concept of emptiness to make my interventions more to the point and more impactful. I also hope it will be of value to people who are interested in Buddhism, mindfulness or (Zen) meditation, to those who take an interest in my artistic work or who are interested in techno-spirituality in general.

Classic suffering

Sickness, old age and death in Buddhist theory are mentioned as one of the causes of suffering (Thanissaro, 1993) which are inescapable. The story goes that when Buddha was a young prince he was shielded from all nastiness of life. During a trip he was confronted with those common forms of suffering and was appalled. He set out on a spiritual journey with the aim to end all this suffering which is described in the Four Noble Truths (ibid). At the end of his journey he came up with a way out of suffering: and the Noble Eightfold Path (Fischer, 2004e). Anyone can follow and experience it for themselves. It describes moral behaviour as well as meditation techniques to arrive at wisdom. But interestingly it also starts with the right understanding. Because from a Buddhist perspective all suffering comes from misunderstanding the true nature of reality and most of all the nature of what we are as humans. At the core of this understanding lies the concept of emptiness. This is expressed very concise the following words:

¹ WHO, <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/diabetes> accessed 19-2-19

² WHO, <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/ageing-and-health> accessed 19-2-19

³ Over 25% of the Dutch population is not satisfied with the amount of leisure time they have <https://longreads.cbs.nl/trends18/maatschappij/cijfers/welzijn/> accessed 25-12-18

⁴ WHO <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/adolescent-mental-health> accessed 19-2-19

⁵ WHO <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/suicide> accessed 19-2-19

⁶ Psychology Today <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-athletes-way/201504/10-ways-mindfulness-and-meditation-promote-well-being> accessed 19-2-19

*Form does not differ from emptiness, emptiness does not differ from form.
That which is form is emptiness, that which is emptiness is form.*

These are famous lines from heart sutra⁷. In this short text Avalokiteśvara⁸ captures the essence of Buddhist wisdom. He explains that even wisdom itself is empty and how this insight can lift all human suffering.

Empty form

Suppose you have an apple in your hand and are about to eat it. What this apple is seems obvious enough: a round shape with a certain smell, taste and texture. But let's take a step back and reflect on this apple and how it got into your hand.

The apple came from a tree, which stands in the soil where it was fed by millions of tiny particles including water and nutrients. The sun shone on its leaves and fruits until it ripened.

The tree was planted by a farmer, the farmer was born out of his parents, was fed as a child to grow into a strong farmer. Perhaps he ate the fruits from the same tree? His mother cooked him meals, his father taught him how to farm, knowledge which they in turn inherited from their teachers, peers and parents.

When you eat the apple it gets mixed with saliva, enters the intestines and will transform into tiny particles which will be absorbed by your body. When you have finished eating and you throw away the core, it might become food to birds or other apple trees.

This network of interconnection keeps expanding until you realise that there are no boundaries to this apple. When I eat the apple where does the apple end and do I begin? It has no beginning and no end. The whole universe is captured in this apple which is only a temporary shape. This interdependence and lack of stability is what is meant by the Buddhist concept of emptiness.

(Fischer, 2004a; Vitale, 2013; Nhat Hanh, 2000)

Comparing apples and humans

A human is of course more complicated than an apple and we are much more than just the physical form of our bodies. To understand what constitutes and explains a sentient being's person and personality from a Buddhist perspective we must turn to the five skandhas⁹. All of them fit into one of these five categories: form, feeling, perception, (thought) formations and consciousness. So how does this work?

There is form, such as an apple. Humans react to form in a basic, primitive way. In Buddhist thought feelings are commonly classified as pleasant, unpleasant or neutral (Mendis, 2006). Through our perception we start to fill in the details and start to construct our own reality from what we perceive. These perceptions take shape and we start interacting with the world based on the reality we have created in our own minds. And finally consciousness arises from these perceptions, formations and thinking (Fischer, 2005b).

With consciousness we connect separate events of feelings, perception and formations as we do frames in a movie. They seem to create a moving image but in fact they are just separate moments in time (ibid). The same can be said about our lives. There is no central narrative or main character. But we solidify fleeting moments and our reactions to them by turning them into concepts and opinions. The final step is to identify with those concepts. We start to see them as parts of what we are and not just the result of our reaction to what takes place in the skandhas. This is the case with concepts

⁷ Sutras are a genre of ancient and medieval Indian texts found in Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism.
<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sutra> accessed 25-12-18

⁸ A bodhisattva that embodies the compassion of all the Buddha's.
<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Avalokite%C5%9Bvara> accessed 25-12-18

⁹ Wikipedia <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Skandha> accessed 18-1-19

we form about the things that surround us. But most of all we identify with thoughts and feelings about ourselves. We identify with a concept we call Self which we perceive as stable and disconnected from other phenomena.

What is wrong with Self?

From the five distinct skandhas we have created the concept of a substantial and independent Self and have identified with it. We have forgotten that all objects in the world are a collection of ever arising and falling forms, sensations, reactions and thoughts. We have become habituated to the idea that we are a stable self. The next step in our mind is to divide the world into two categories: me and them, mine and not mine (Fischer, 2005a).

Because we live in the delusion that phenomena will not change our common interaction with the world is to want hold on to things that give us pleasure and push away things we find less pleasant or painful. We are often not aware that even the most pleasant experiences have an element of unsatisfactoriness in them because we dread their ending. The same is true for the concept of Self, we cling to it and fight anything that threatens to end it. This of course makes our relationship with anything we do not consider Self complicated.

Again and again we have to come to terms with the unstable nature of reality and our self only to forget about it as soon as the anguish is over. We are caught in a chain reaction of cause and effect that keeps us locked in fear of pain and desire for pleasure. Always wanting the impossible: unchanging pleasure through changing phenomena, we are never at peace or satisfied. This is what is called *Dukkha* in Buddhism: the fundamental unsatisfactoriness and painfulness of mundane life¹⁰.

Freedom

Avalokiteśvara bodhisattva when practicing deeply the prajna paramita perceived that all five skandhas in their own being are empty and was saved from all suffering.

Are we doomed to be trapped in our ignorance forever? In order to become free we must look deeply and see the true nature of things: empty of an essence and impermanent.

We will then see how we ourselves are constantly changing: our bodies, thoughts, and emotions. Our relationships and activities change from moment to moment. There is nothing here that we can call Self or other, they are concepts we use to deal with the world on a day to day basis.

Essentially a person is nothing more than a series of clusters of mental and physical events which occur in a relatively stable pattern which we call a human (Vitale, 2012a). So we can say we are empty too.

We have to move to a new way of perceiving reality, go beyond the dualism of self and other, heaven and hell, being and not being. The world and our lives will be the same but by looking deeper we no longer attach to the pleasure and fear the pain. They are still there but by discovering their true nature we can be as content in possessing something as we can be in losing it. This is a state of equanimity. A stable sense of contentment with what is there, exactly as it is.

Avalokiteśvara goes even one step further and discovered that even the five skandhas are empty. Where does this leave us? This implies that everything in this world is empty to begin with, we don't need a path, and we are already liberated and free from suffering. This is the wisdom beyond wisdom. Does this mean we can just sit back and relax? No, the sutra starts by saying that Avalokiteśvara practiced deeply and then perceived all five skandhas as empty. So we have to do something in order to experience that we are already liberated.

¹⁰ Wikipedia, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dukkha>, accessed 25-12-18

Acquiring insight

The ultimate wisdom as outlined above isn't something that will just occur automatically after we have heard or read about it. These insights have to become embodied and felt as an everyday reality. It implies a complete shift in perception of not only the world around us but also our Self.

The traditional way to actualise these insights is by following the Noble eight-fold path as laid out by the Buddha. This path consists of a mixture of guidelines for moral behaviour in daily life and meditation training to sharpen the mind and open it up to a new way of seeing reality. But this reality of emptiness of all phenomena is very much opposed to our accustomed way of seeing and interpreting the world around us. We have to retrain our mind and beat a very much ingrained habit. Preparing our minds in this way may take decades and the way Buddhists see it many lives. Given the already full and hectic lives many people don't have the time or the ambition to practice insight meditation intensively for many years. That is why I want to explore an alternative route to experiencing insight directly in an ordinary setting, during daily life.

Interface to wisdom

I want to propose an interface to the wisdom of emptiness. Of course in essence all of reality is an interface to wisdom. If you take the time to look carefully at what goes on around us and inside us the truth of interdependence and impermanence is obvious. But as explained above not many people have the time or the inclination to do this. On the other hand they do suffer the consequences of not being able to see things as they are.

My interface will be embedded in our every day experiences of our busy, modern lives using the latest technologies to reveal and enlarge the reality of things as they already are. I will explore how to use new technologies like augmented reality, Internet of Things and sensor technology to create a mixed reality. The interface will transform everyday activities and objects and break open fixed perceptions about them revealing their impermanence and interconnectedness.

Informed by user experiments and real-time physiological sensor data I will tap into the optimal mind-state at the right time and place. There I will create embodied experiences with the potential to set in motion or sustain the transformative process of individuals. They aim to support the path to transcendence which might lead to a state of wisdom beyond wisdom.

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