

## Do We Exist? And Why it Matters

### Being, Emptiness, and the Notion of Non-Existence

Judith Blackstone, PhD

I was living at the Zen Mountain Monastery in upstate New York in 1982, when we had an esteemed visitor. I do not remember his name, but he was introduced as a tutor of the Dalai Lama. I do remember vividly the lecture that he gave in our Zendo.

He sat cross-legged on a zafu at the front of the room, a large, round-faced, bare-armed figure in a maroon robe, still exotic to our sensibility in the early eighties. We sat absolutely still, as we'd been trained, as this man placed one massive hand on his ear and rocked from side to side like a slow-paced metronome. With his free hand he extended toward us, for our scrutiny, a yellow pencil. As he rocked, he repeated a single phrase over and over, so many times that it is indelibly imprinted on my memory. The phrase was: "the non-findability of inherent reality in objects from their own side."

In the years since that lecture, I have come to appreciate the delicate precision of the Buddhist teachings. I have also come to a growing sense of concern at the lack of precision with which Western teachers and students often interpret these teachings. This is particularly true of the Buddhist teaching of non-findability which is often confused with the notion of non-existence. I am going to show how a number of different Buddhist teachers have clarified this distinction and why I feel that this clarification is of vital importance to us as practitioners.

For example, here is a passage from a discourse given by the Dalai Lama.<sup>1</sup>

"But when we really investigate and scrutinize how things exist, we discover that they are simply what can be labeled by names or concepts. Consider the case of a person, "me." Like a snake that can be labeled onto a striped rope in the dark, without actually being that rope, a person is simply what can be labeled onto aggregate factors of experience as its basis for labeling, but without actually being those aggregates...All phenomena lack any existence other than one established simply in relation to names."

Even though, when you look at a chair, you immediately, in whatever language you speak, think "chair," there is actually no essential "chairness" there. If you had been taught that this particular configuration of wood, nails, etc. was a table, you would then automatically think "table."

When I hear a teaching of this sort, I question the purpose of this information. Although it is undoubtedly true that we attribute labels to raw sensory information, what is so important about eliminating those labels from our experience? So important that it is one of the foundational teachings of Buddhism.

It is important to keep in mind that Buddhism is not a metaphysical system. It is primarily concerned with experience, with facilitating a phenomenological shift. It is concerned with happiness. In an often told story, the Buddha says that asking metaphysical questions is like a man who has been shot by an arrow, inquiring about the maker of the arrow, and the type of wood that he used. Buddhism is concerned with the removal of the arrow, the overcoming of suffering. And suffering is clearly defined as dukha, or the desire for life to be different than it is. To this end, the Buddha advises us to "Regard this phantom world, as a star at dawn, a bubble in a stream, a flash of lightning in a summer cloud, a flickering lamp, a phantom, and a dream."

This is experiential rather than metaphysical language. He does not say that life is a dream, he says that we should regard it as a dream. He points to a radical and difficult shift in our attitude toward life. This is a teaching of non-grasping. It is letting life be exactly as it is, without manipulating it, without adding conceptual elaboration to the immediate and transitory moment of experience.

According to the Tibetan Buddhist teacher, Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, non-grasping allows us to experience the full impact of life, to experience "rawness" and "suchness" and "true ordinariness." We experience what he calls "the stoneness of stone and the waterness of water."<sup>ii</sup> He writes, "The whole idea is that we must drop all reference points, all concepts of what is or what should be. Then it is possible to experience the uniqueness and vividness of phenomena directly....Movement happens within vast space."<sup>iii</sup>

So non-grasping offers us directness of experience. When we grasp at life conceptually, by labeling and mentally elaborating on everything we perceive, or when we mistake fleeting perceptual stimuli for concrete, lasting reality, we separate ourselves from life. When we experience life directly, we are fully immersed in it.

The Buddhist teachings often point out that when we try to find ourselves, we cannot. We only find passing fragments of experience, "aggregates", such as emotions, thoughts, sensations. But this instruction, to try (and fail) to find ourselves, also begs the question: who is looking? When we watch ourselves, we make an object of ourselves, we become another labeled object, another conceptual phantom. But who is watching? That, to me, is the mystery. There is not "no one" there, because "there" is the one who is doing the search.

The ninth century Zen master, Rinzai, says to his students, "Who then can understand the Dharma and can listen to it? The one here before your very eyes, brilliantly clear and shining without any form--there he is who can understand the Dharma you are listening to. If you can really grasp this, you are not different from the Buddhas and patriarchs. Ceaselessly he is right here, conspicuously present."<sup>iv</sup>

And here is the same passage from another translation: "What is it, then, that knows how to preach the Dharma or listen to the Dharma? It is you who are right here before my eyes, this lone brightness without fixed shape or form--this is what knows how to preach the Dharma and listen to the Dharma. If you can see it this way, you'll be no different from the patriarchs and the buddhas."<sup>v</sup>

This teaching states explicitly that there is someone there, but that someone is not an object, but a subject, the one who can listen and teach. This "formless self" is beyond the narrative or autobiographical self, or any other contents of experience. So even though we cannot find a self as an object, even though that self is not a particular form, it is still there, listening, responding. This is a vitally important component of the Buddhist teachings, a corrective to the misinterpretation of the doctrine of non-findability as non-existence.

The contemporary teacher, Trultrim Gyamtso Rinpoche, offers a similar corrective. He writes, "The perfectly existent nature is the ultimate absolute emptiness. It is the non-conceptual Wisdom Mind, non-arising, non-abiding, and non-perishing. It is primordially existent and endowed with qualities. It is empty in the sense that it is free from all the obscurations created by the conceptual mind. Therefore when the conceptual mind tries to grasp it, it finds nothing

and so it experiences it as emptiness. Thus it is empty to the conceptual mind, but from its own point of view it is the Clear Light Nature of Mind together with all its qualities."<sup>vi</sup>

In this statement, we see that this Wisdom Mind knows itself, but not conceptually, not as an object. When we try to find it as an object, we come up empty. Yet, here it is.

This is an understanding of self as ungraspable, as a primary dimension of subjectivity that does not divide itself into an observing subject and an object of observation, that does not construct fixed representations of itself. The twentieth century Zen philosopher, Nishitani, describes this experience as the "near side" of our subjectivity, "more oriented to the near side than our ordinary near side"<sup>vii</sup> and as our "home-ground on which we are what we are in our self-nature, and on which things are what they are in themselves."<sup>viii</sup> He calls this the "original self in itself."<sup>ix</sup> He writes, "True emptiness is nothing less than what reaches awareness in all of us as our own absolute self-nature."<sup>x</sup>

Nishitani makes the point that emptiness is not the same as non-existence. When we realize the radical openness and self-object unity of emptiness, we do not cease to exist--we strip ourselves down to existence itself. He writes, "...both being and emptiness are seen as co-present from the start and structurally inseparable from one another."<sup>xi</sup>

Nishitani is saying that emptiness is not something separate from the self, not separate from our subjectivity, because if it were, it would be an object, a thing that is somehow separate from being. He writes about the common confusion on this point: "...nihility comes to be represented as something outside of the existence of the self and of all things, as some 'thing' absolutely other than existence, some 'thing' called nothingness. The problem is that traces of the

common view that simply sets nothingness over against existence as a mere conceptual negation persist."<sup>xii</sup>

In other words, we can only regard ourselves as non-existent from a conceptual standpoint. We can only theorize or imagine that we do not exist. But emptiness is not something that we construct or imagine; we realize it, we experience it as our own nature. It is who we actually are: listening, knowing, and speaking.

This experience has qualities, as all experiences do, and as Tsultrim Rinpoche claims in the quote above: "the Clear Light Nature of Mind with all its qualities." One quality of this experience is spaciousness.

The renowned medieval Tibetan Buddhist master, Longchen Rabjam, writes, "Within the spacious expanse, the spacious expanse, the spacious vast expanse, I, Longchen Rabjam, for whom the lucid expanse of being is infinite, experience everything as embraced within a blissful expanse, a single nondual expanse."<sup>xiii</sup>

He says that the spacious expanse is "blissful" and "lucid." An awakened person does not become blank or hollow. Rather, he or she embodies the qualities of bliss, lucidity (sometimes called clarity) and spaciousness.

The twentieth century Zen philosopher Hisamatsu writes, "For the nothingness of Zen is not lifeless like emptiness, but, on the contrary, something quite lively (*lebendig*). It is not only lively, but also has a heart, and moreover, is aware of itself."<sup>xiv</sup>

These teachings point to a primary experience of oneself, more fundamental than the changing content of our experience. We can say that this primary dimension is impersonal in the

sense that it is experienced in the same way by anyone who uncovers it. Yet, as the most fundamental experience that we can each have of ourselves, it is deeply, quintessentially personal.

But what of the changing content of our experience, the preferences, talents, desires and memories that make us all different from each other? Is that eradicated by the realization of this universal dimension of experience? Nishitani claims that the unique individual is even more clearly revealed by the ground of emptiness and being. He writes, "'It is the field in which each and every thing—as an absolute center, possessed of an absolutely unique individuality—becomes manifest as it is in itself.'"<sup>xv</sup>

As we realize ourselves as the vast, blissful expanse, we gradually let go of the rigid protective organizations of mind and body, and the fixed mental attitudes and concepts of ourselves that obscure our basic nature. But this awakening does not eradicate our personality, such as the sound of our voice, our particular sense of humor, or the familial and cultural history that has helped shape us.

This fundamental awareness also does not eradicate our basic capacities, such as our ability to remember our past or to reflect on our present experience or to relate with other human beings. If it did, it would mean that realization was momentary, a quick dart into the absolute and then an inevitable return to "conventional" reality in which we cannot help but remember, reflect and relate to others. But realization is not momentary--it matures into an ongoing experience of our fundamental nature. We can sustain this realization because the content of experience is encompassed and even clearly revealed by the primary dimension of being and emptiness. Nishitani says of relationships in the dimension: "This encounter is called 'essential'

because it takes place at the source of existence common to the one and the other and yet at a point where each is truly itself."<sup>xvi</sup>

A Buddhist treatise<sup>xvii</sup> says, "There isn't anything that is either real or false. The wise have said that everything is like the moon's reflection on water." In his commentary on this passage, Thrangu Rinpoche says, "This does not mean to say that nothing happens or exists. Things exist just because the mind clearly perceives, understands, cognises, and knows." <sup>xviii</sup>

This treatise claims that everything we experience is a reflection in our consciousness. This means that we cannot know anything outside of what our consciousness reflects. If our consciousness is murky, than that murkiness will obscure the reflection of phenomena. If our consciousness is full of desire for life to be different than it is, full of clinging to pleasure and aversion to pain, than that desire will manipulate and distort our experience of life. But a clear mind reflects life as it is. A clear mind is non-clinging. This means that as the empty, primary subjectivity that we basically are, we can allow life to happen, to flow through us, to change.

These Buddhist teachings make an explicit distinction between an ontological assertion of non-existence and a practice of non-grasping through understanding the non-findability of inherent existence. But this vital distinction is too often ignored in the spiritual teachings in the West today. Today there is an almost gleeful celebration of non-existence, as if that were the ultimate truth about life. There has begun to be a "party line" in the contemporary spiritual field, an unthinking acceptance of this misleading teaching.

I consider this inaccuracy destructive because it encourages people to create an imaginary fragmentation in what is essentially whole. In psychological terminology, it encourages them to dissociate, to disown major elements of their inner life. In spiritual terminology, it enforces a



duality of self and object that obscures the fundamental unity of subject and object. It fragments being from emptiness. It inserts an artificial divide between our subjectivity and the contents of its experience. Often in the name of "nonduality" it submerges subjectivity into objectivity. To use the analogy of the moon reflected in the water, it denies the water and leaves us with just the moon. Instead of a unity of perceiver and perception, they claim that there can be perception without a perceiver, activity without an actor.

I said above that we can only theorize or imagine that we do not exist. We can never experience that we do not exist, because who would be experiencing it? That "who" exists. We can speculate that beyond experience there is non-existence, but anything that is beyond experience can only be speculation. And Buddhism is based on a rejection of metaphysical speculation.

As a psychotherapist and meditation teacher, I have seen many serious Buddhist practitioners actively pretending that they do not exist. They blank out their eyes, and flatten their emotional expression. They attempt to separate themselves from their sensations, feelings and thoughts, either by observing them from the outside, or by shutting down contact with them. They hold a fixed focus on "the moment" by which they mean whatever is happening outside of their body in the environment. But the clear light of the Wisdom Mind, the formless brightness that is who we actually are, does not require a fixed focus. It is not fixed at all; it is unattached (non-grasping) and spontaneously present.

When our consciousness is murky, it touches the surface of the objects it perceives. But the clear light of the wisdom mind pervades its objects. In other words, the spaciousness of the wisdom mind is not just experienced around objects, as physical space is. It is experienced

pervading objects. Just as the moon reflected in the water seems to be made of water, we experience both our body and our environment as made of this subtle, sentient space. This is an experience of transparency, of being made of being and emptiness, and of everything around us as made of the same being and emptiness.<sup>xix</sup> The Japanese Zen philosopher, Yuasa, writes, "The 'mind' here is not the surface consciousness, but is the 'mind' that penetrates into the body and deeply subjectivizes it."<sup>xx</sup> We feel both empty, made of space, and vividly present, deeply in touch with ourselves at the same time.

In order for us to experience this consciousness, we have to be this consciousness. We cannot experience it separate from ourselves. We can only experience it through deep contact with ourselves. Wherever this consciousness reaches within our body, we are in contact with our own internal form. At the same time, wherever this consciousness reaches in our body, we are open to the environment. For example, if we become conscious throughout the internal space of our chest, this present moment occurs inside and outside of our chest at the same time.<sup>xxi</sup> When this consciousness reaches everywhere in our body, we are in contact with our whole internal form. And at the same time, we are clear-through open to our environment. This openness reveals the unified transparency of self and other, the vast expanse of being and emptiness.

Existence is the greatest mystery. I do not think that the Buddhist teachings are attempting to help us understand or solve this mystery, but to fully embody it.

---

<sup>i</sup> *The Gelug/Kagyü Tradition of Mahamudra*, translated by Alexander Berzin, Ithaca, Snow Lion, 1997, downloaded from the internet on August 15, 2012, [http://www.berzinarchives.com/web/en/archives/e-books/published\\_books/gelug\\_kagyü\\_mahamudra/pt4/mm\\_21.html](http://www.berzinarchives.com/web/en/archives/e-books/published_books/gelug_kagyü_mahamudra/pt4/mm_21.html)

<sup>ii</sup> *Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism*, Trungpa Rinpoche, Berkeley, Shambhala, 1973, p. 223

<sup>iii</sup> *The Myth of Freedom*, Trungpa Rinpoche, Boston, MA, Shambhala, 1988, p. 14

<sup>iv</sup> *The Zen Teaching of Rinzai*, translated by Irmgard Schloegl, Berkeley, Shambhala, 1975, p. 22

<sup>v</sup> *The Zen Teaching of Master Lin Chi*, translated by Burton Watson, downloaded from the internet on August 20, 2012, <http://allspirit.co.uk/rinzai.html>

<sup>vi</sup> *Progressive Stages of Meditation on Emptiness*, Tsultrim Gyamstso Rinpoche, Translated by Shenpen Hookham, Auckland, New Zealand, Zhyi-sil Cho-kyi Gha-tsal Publications, 2001, p.75

<sup>vii</sup> *Religion and Nothingness*, Keiji Nishitani, Translated by Jan Van Bragt, Berkeley, CA, University of California Press, 1982, p. 137

<sup>viii</sup> *Ibid*, p. 107

<sup>ix</sup> *Ibid*, p. 151

<sup>x</sup> *Ibid*, p. 106

<sup>xi</sup> *Ibid*, p. 97

<sup>xii</sup> *Ibid*, p. 96

<sup>xiii</sup> *A Treasure Trove of Scriptural Transmission*, Longchen Rabjam, Junction City, CA, Padma Publishing, p. 215

<sup>xiv</sup> quoted in *The Formless Self*, Joan Stambaugh, Albany, NY, State University of New York Press, 1999, p. 79

<sup>xv</sup> *Religion and Nothingness*, Keiji Nishitani, Berkeley, CA, California University Press, 1983, p. 164

<sup>xvi</sup> *Ibid*, p. 102

<sup>xvii</sup> *The Tathagatagarba*, attributed to the Third Karmapa, Rangjung Dorje, according to *An Illumination of the Thoughts of Rangjung (Dorje): A Commentary to "The Treatise that Teaches the Buddha Nature"* by Jamgon Kongtrul Lodro Thaye the Great, translated by Peter Roberts, downloaded from the internet, <http://www.rinpoche.com/teachings/buddhanature.htm> August 20, 2012

<sup>xviii</sup> Discourse by Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche, Presented at the Namo Buddha Seminar in Oxford, 1990, Transcribed & edited in 1990 & rewritten by Gaby Hollmann, Munich, Dec. 2005, downloaded from the internet, <http://www.rinpoche.com/teachings/buddhanature.htm> August 20, 2012

<sup>xix</sup> *Belonging Here*, Judith Blackstone, Boulder, CO, Sounds True, 2011

<sup>xx</sup> *The Body*, Yuasa Yasuo, Albany, NY, State University of NY, 1987, p. 105

<sup>xxi</sup> *Ibid*