

THE EMPTINESS THAT IS FULL

There is an Indian song that is worth remembering, called "The Lesson of the Tree." It says:

It endures all the heat of the sun and gives to everyone the coolness of its shade.

And we, what is it that we do?

Gandhi

Thinking back, we learned that the Buddha's quest was to understand the cause of suffering and sorrow and to find the path to the cessation of suffering and sorrow. To that end, he taught The Four Truths quoted below:

- 1.) To exist as a separate personality predestines suffering and sorrow.
- 2.) The greatest cause of misery is the desire to possess and the desire to preserve things possessed.
- 3.) Freedom from suffering is obtained by the slaying out of all desires, save the desire for right action.
- 4.) The way of liberation and to the cessation of all opposites is the Noble Eight-Fold Path, the way of immortality.

The question is, "What do these sentences mean?" Is the Buddha telling us that the only way we can step away from pain, suffering and sorrow is to renounce the world, or was he saying something entirely different? When I first began to study Eastern thought, I was frankly confused about the message of the Buddha. How I came to understand that message is educational and worth recounting.

I have a group of friends that I eat with every evening. Each person has their own night to cook: I cook on Friday; Cathy cooks on Sunday; Bryan cooks on Thursday; etc. Everyone in the group is relatively like-minded in their philosophy of life even though the range of ages is from thirty-two to seventy-five and the professions range from psychologist, MD, acupuncturist and chiropractor to novelist and physicist/teacher (the latter being myself). We are not a commune . . . we don't live together . . . but our eating group has been intact for over eighteen years. It's a lot like an extended family.

Just a few years after the group formed, one of our members (Katie) had a close friend die. I knew she generally accepted the Buddhist version of reincarnation, so although I was sorry about the death I took the news in a relatively off-handed way. I even went so far as to joke about it, saying at one point something to the effect of, "Ho hum. You come in, you go out. No big deal. On with the show."

I wasn't *trying* to be rankly insensitive. Death, I reasoned at the time, was nothing more than a transition from one state to another . . . like crossing over a line. It wasn't as though Katie's friend had ceased to be. He was just somewhere else. Sure, she couldn't talk to him any more. But if reincarnation was a reality, that wasn't necessarily a permanent situation. It never occurred to me that she would take his departure in any other way.

As intellectually sound as my reasoning seemed, it turned out that my attitude weighed heavily on her. She never complained, but she was taking things hard and I wasn't helping. When I finally realized that, two thoughts came to mind. The first was, "Geez, Fletch, you *are* a clod!" The second, no less on-target but certainly more thought provoking, was "Why is she having so much trouble dealing with this?" I had never had anyone close to me die, so I really didn't understand.

Fortunately, one of the blessings I seem to have inherited from life is a talent for stumbling into illuminating situations that clarify things that I hadn't previously understood. I had only to wait a few months before the beginning of the potentially enlightening circumstance to land at my feet. It came in the form of a cat.

Another of my friends, Cathy, loves cats. When her kids were young, they'd bring home strays and she'd take them in. I say this by way of establishing that I wasn't particularly surprised to notice, one fine June day a few months after Katie's ordeal, that Cathy had added another feline to her burgeoning menagerie of eight.

"It wasn't my fault," she protested as I began to chivvy her about the newest arrival. "One of my cats was missing so I went to the Humane Society to see if she had been turned in. I was walking down one of the aisles in the room where the cat cages are when I was brought up short by an enormous paw that reached out from one of the cages and stopped me cold. I looked and saw a huge, gray, longhaired cat—pretty well beaten up—peering out at me in a very dignified way. I asked the attendant about the cat and was told that he was suppose to have been put to sleep earlier that day but hadn't been because they weren't able to find his paper work. So what could I do?"

What, indeed. Gray became a part of Cathy's household, and that was that.

The poor fellow did have problems. A few months after Cathy found him it became evident that one of his eyes had to be removed. I have a strong rapport with animals, so during that period I spent a considerable amount of time sitting quietly with him. Although I didn't intend it to happen, he evidently took it personally and attached himself quite strongly to me.

Three months after his operation, I made the mistake of going out and leaving my back door open (I was renting the place next door to Cathy's home at the time). When I got home I found Gray all curled up in the corner of my living room cleaning himself. For those of you who know anything about cats, you know that kind of activity means the cat is feeling comfortable, secure, and at home. Put another way, he adopted me.

A few months later, I had to move out of my house (the owners wanted to sell it) and I ended up in a small apartment in South Pasadena (I still ate with the group but was no longer in the neighborhood). The move really upset the cat, so although I hadn't up until that time allowed him to sleep on my bed at night (I'd made him his own bed), I let him do so that first night because I didn't want him to be frightened. Of course, that was all it took. From then on, the bed was his whenever he wanted it.

As I got better acquainted with him, Gray turned out to be a very special cat. For instance, every evening just after I'd go to bed, he would come in, hop up on the bed, plant himself sphinx-style on my chest, then proceed to purr until I'd fallen asleep. He did it every night. He'd stay only as long as I was awake; as soon as I was asleep he'd get up and leave (I know that because a couple of times I woke up shortly after dozing off and he'd be gone). One of his catly duties, as far as he was evidently concerned, was to purr me to sleep at night.

He had other characteristics that were unique. He was very patient, for instance. I'd be sitting at my desk working when I'd suddenly get the feeling that I was being

watched. I'd swing around and there he'd be, sitting at the kitchen door, patiently waiting for me to realize that he was hungry and that I should get up and go feed him. There was no meowing, no nudging things off my desk, no nipping at my heels. He would just sit there stoically, waiting for me to notice him.

He would occasionally do things that were quite special. I used to get horrendous headaches. I remember going to bed one night with a small throbbing only to awaken around 2:00 A.M. with a really big one. I got up, took two aspirin, then crawled back into bed anticipating the usual, painful, forty-five minute wait that normally preceded the aspirin taking effect and my drifting back off to sleep. Gray was in the living room asleep on the couch at the time, and when I went into the bathroom I must have awakened him. Within a minute or so of my getting back into bed, he came padding into my room, jumped up on the bed, walked around to my face (I was on my side facing the wall), lay down in his customary sphinx-like position next to me, *butted his head up against my forehead* and, holding that position, started to purr.

My headache began to recede almost immediately, and within five minutes I was fast asleep. I have no idea what was in his mind when he did it, but as far as I was concerned it was one of the nicest shows of affection I had ever experienced.

I'm telling you all of this because I want you to understand that the animal was quite special to me. He was like a companion and I depended on his presence in my life. I didn't think about the attachment at the time, but it was there and it was strong. Unfortunately, he was quite old when I got him. Within a few years his kidneys failed and I had to have him put to sleep.

He lay in my lap as I drove him to the vet that day. I was naturally upset but was determined to keep a stiff upper lip. When I arrived at the animal hospital, there was one thing I wanted to be sure about: I wanted his body cremated. I didn't want him thrown in a freezer after I had left, only to be sold to some biological supplies house for sale as a high school dissection lab.

I took Gray into the surgery. Everything was fine until I tried to quiz the vet about the cremation. As soon as I opened my mouth to speak, it was all over. Uncontrolled tears and sobs. The vet was horrified, having absolutely no clue as to how to deal with a full grown male tearing mightily all over the office. I finally got my question out and the vet gave me an acceptable answer, so with the cat in my arms he gave Gray a lethal injection and the cat dropped off immediately.

My emotions calmed two minutes after I left the vet's, but I really did not understand the crescendo in the first place. I loved my cat and wanted the best for him. He'd had a good life with me and it was time to go. If his small self did continue to exist, he was certainly in a considerably more peaceful state "on the other side" than he was in his decrepit, painful body here. There was no reason for me to be so upset.

As I usually do whenever I'm thoroughly confused, I spent time that night reflecting on the happenings of the day. I began by thinking about Gray, projecting gratitude toward him for his friendship; apologies for my occasional thoughtlessnesses in his regard; blessing him for the efforts he had made as he attempted to deal with life. And although I surely couldn't prove it, for a short period of time I had a genuine feeling of Gray's contented presence. In fact, as I sat there in silence I distinctly heard the sound of a cat purring. It only lasted for a minute, then was gone, but it was definitely there for a while. After it left, I continued my quiet meditation.

I should mention here that meditation can be a very strange experience in the sense that it can take you places in your mind that you would never have expected to go. It's as though the plodding, step by step, intellectual mind goes to sleep and something much more powerful takes over. Great leaps of understanding come as ideas that previously seemed disconnected fall into place and deep insights open themselves to you. It is a whole *other way* of thinking.

So as I sat that night, reflecting upon the emotional knot I had experienced earlier that day, I was surprised to find myself drawn into a contemplation of the teachings of the Buddha. I had previously studied Buddhist beliefs and hadn't had a lot of luck making sense of them. What was remarkable was that during that meditation, in an instant, everything came together and I saw in myself what the Buddha was talking about in his teachings.

What became evident follows:

We've said that Awareness focuses into experience through the personal complex we call the child-self. In the process, that personal self takes on a life of its own which we, as Awarenesses, totally identify with when in a body.

The problem is that at humanity's current stage of development (on average), the child we each sport as ourselves is very much a mixed bag. It has (we have) developed

within itself some qualities that are noble, selfless, and in harmony with the benevolence of God. This is the higher side of the child.

Unfortunately, we have also developed a lesser side to the child that is almost totally devoted to nothing further than itself. It is that part of the self that incessantly cries: I want to be secure; I want to be liked; I want to be wealthy; I want to be respected; I want to be fulfilled; I want to have fun; I want to have power; I want to do damn well whatever I please.

I want; I want; I want. That's its battle cry.

In short, if you look around today you will find very few people who *don't* focus a fair portion of their *thought* and *energy* almost entirely on the fulfillment of their desires and perceived needs regardless of the fact that those desires and needs change with the wind.¹

What this means is that in most cases, the world the child builds around itself is here today, gone tomorrow. And because very little of lasting quality is being built into the self, the *child-self* that we identify with so completely is remarkably *empty of lasting substance*.

Down deep, the child is aware of this substancelessness even though it doesn't want to acknowledge it, so it attempts to cover it over in any way it can. In all cases, its focus is to *feel good now*, consequences be damned, but it usually attempts to accomplish this task in one of two general ways.

The first has to do with a deadening of itself to the world both *out there* and *within*. This can be done in several ways. Drugs most immediately come to mind, but even activities as innocuous as watching TV can be effective. Just flop down in an armchair, turn on the tube, find a good movie and zone out. Absorption into fantasy is not necessarily bad—you aren't bound for hell if you do it and, in a lot of instances, it is useful to allow the mind to relax. But taken to extremes you find a child-self that just wants to mindlessly drift. Drifting is comfortable; drifting is effortless; drifting centers attention *out there*, versus *in here*.[†]

¹ How many of the things you thought were important when you were five years old are still important to you now? How many of the things you think are important now will be important fifty years from now or, if reincarnation is a reality, *five hundred* years from now? There is very little within the child's world that is lasting.

[†] Note from 2019: The modern day version of this is having one's nose stuck permanently in a cell phone.

There are other ways to deaden the self's sensitivity to its internal state. Have you ever known people who are addicted to activity, who are constantly moving, moving, moving. This is hardly mindless, but it's often repetitive action. It is the person who is so busy that they couldn't possibly stop to consider their state of inner affairs. It is the child-self that believes that if it is in motion, it must be real.

The second way the child deals with its emptiness is to use the creativity of thought available to it to build a material and emotional world around itself that makes it *feel* fulfilled and worthwhile even though it knows that at its core it is not. It works to accumulate wealth (I can't tell you the number of young people I know who truly believe that having lots of money will make them happy). It goes out of its way to make friends, gain power, accumulate prestige, make a family²—whatever the child thinks will give its existence meaning. In short, the child draws around itself *things* from *out there* to bolster itself, to make it feel complete and whole and secure. And when it gets those things, it attaches itself to those supports like a barnacle to a pier.

There is nothing *inherently* wrong with having money, friends, or family, but when the child becomes attached to those things, *drawing them around itself to cover over the emptiness it feels within*, it lives in an illusion the Buddhist call *the fullness that is empty*.

With all this in mind, what was going on with my reaction to Gray's death?

I would never have done anything to knowingly harm him—I loved him very much—but there was a part of me that *unconsciously* nurtured a rather selfish significance to his presence in my life. I expected certain things from him. It didn't matter what was going on *out there* in the big, bad world. He was always waiting for me to get home, always ready to jump up on my lap at a moment's notice, always there to purr me to sleep at evening's end. He supported me, and because he did so I became even more attached to him than might otherwise have been the case.

When Gray died, the mental and emotional support he afforded me vanished, the void he had helped fill was left agape, and I was left with the pain of separation.³

² I know of at least three women who have had babies specifically because they wanted someone who would love them and someone they could love back.

³ One of the things I noticed in the meditation after Gray's death was that when he died, it was as though a big piece of me had been quite literally ripped away. What was left uncovered was a feeling of aloneness, a feeling of deep emptiness. If the East's view is correct, I was feeling emptiness that was there all along. My child-self had unconsciously used his presence to fill in space—to cover over the void. I just didn't

My tears in the vet's office . . . they weren't for Gray, they were for myself.

Now I understood better how Katie felt with the death of her friend. And what about Benson—the man who lost his whole family. Nobody in their right mind would be critical of or surprised by how devastated he was—you or I would undoubtedly have felt similarly. But if you think about it, his reaction didn't make much sense. The guy was a Christian. His wife and daughter were good people. They had died probably two hours before he was called. That meant that when he got the news, they should have been in heaven doing, as Mark Twain put it, "things you'd never be caught dead doing when you were alive—like singing in a choir and playing a harp . . ."

From an intellectual perspective, they weren't in any pain when he found out about the accident. In fact, they were in a very nice place (assuming his religious beliefs were a reality). So why was he so upset?

As little as he probably realized it, he was upset for himself. I'm sure he loved his wife very much, but selfless love is rarely the only emotion that exists between spouses. She provided stability in his life. She was the one who patted him on his back when things got rough and told him everything would be OK. She was the one he confided in; the one he made plans around; his mate; his companion. He had invested an enormous amount of personal energy into his relationship with her, and all of a sudden she wasn't there any more.

When someone dies, it is not unusual to hear a loved one say things like, "Why did he (or she) leave me?" Or, "How will I ever live without him (or her)?" I've even known people who were *angry* at the deceased for dying.

When people cry at funerals, nine times out of ten they aren't crying for the departed. Usually they are crying for their *own* loss.⁴

realize it until that psychological patch was removed. That isn't to say I didn't love my cat—that I wouldn't have done the best for him in any situation that might have arisen. It is to say that a part of me attributed a significance to his existence in my life that was essentially selfish.

⁴ Love is a strangely perceived thing in our world. If a boy *really* loves a girl, he won't make her life miserable when and if she breaks up with him. He might be personally unhappy about the decision, but if he *truly loves her*, her best interests will be uppermost in his mind. Given the petty little things that rejected lovers so often do to get back at the other person, one wonders what a guy in the early stages of a romance really means when he whispers to his girl, "I love you."

In a similar vein, assuming an individual continues to exist after the death of the body (i.e., goes to heaven or into the inner worlds or whatever), imagine how traumatic it must be for that departed Being to feel the deep despair loved ones often respond with as a consequence of its departure. Put another way, people who grieve terribly don't think about the consequences of their despair on others, *including the departed*. Their "love" just doesn't extend that far.

With this commentary on the child-self in mind, let's get back to the teachings of the Buddha.

From his life story, it should be obvious that the Buddha was not some terrible, austere, self-punishing fanatic out to convince the world that pleasure is bad and the only road to salvation is by way of denial and hardship. He was a Being who loved deeply.

So what was he saying? There is nothing wrong with taking up the path of materialism, he said, but you need to know that if you do, by the very nature of the drive that motivates you to do so (i.e., the emptiness within the child), there will come a time when it will lead you to pain and suffering.

That was what the Buddha's Four Truths were meant to say. To put it in the vernacular, you can have your expensive car, a luxurious beach house, your own multinational company, a beautiful wife (or handsome husband), perfectly perfect children, good health, a great body, athletic prowess, even all the money in the world. But if you have acquired those things to feel more complete, or content, or worthwhile, you will have failed. The acquisition of "things" doesn't bring real peace and happiness. Why? *It is the emptiness within the child-self that prompts the self's need for distraction and the acquisition of things; it is the loss of those things that brings pain.* That was the message of the Buddha's Four Truths:

- 1.) To exist as a separate personality (i.e., to live the life of a personal child-self, complete with its fleeting desires and wants and its selfish, often reckless pursuit of self gratification) predestines suffering and sorrow (due to the very nature of the child's quest for what it thinks will satisfy it).
- 2.) The greatest cause of misery is the desire to possess and the desire to preserve things possessed (both consequences of the child's insecurities).
- 3.) Freedom from suffering is obtained by the slaying out of all desires (i.e., the living of a life that works toward eliminating the child's *need* to cover over its void-riddled self with apparent fullness), save the desire for right action.
- 4.) The way of liberation and to the cessation of all opposites (i.e., to the stepping away from the personal pulling and tugging that the child

so often engages in as it desperately tries to control its world for its own purposes) is the Noble Eight-fold Path, the way of immortality.

The last line of the Buddha's *Four Truths* speaks of the Noble Eight-Fold Path. Its virtues are Right Belief, Right Aspiration, Right Speech, Right Conduct, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Meditation.

"Contemplate these," said the Buddha, "following them to the best of your understanding, and you will begin to build into yourself qualities of such worth that the self's emptiness will be replaced by substance that is worthy of being kept."

Speaking of the sixth and seventh virtues (I've chosen these arbitrarily) of the Eight-Fold Path in his pamphlet *The Buddha*, Manly Hall wrote:

The sixth virtue of the Noble Eightfold Path is Right Effort: Those who move in purity of motive; whose honesty and sincerity hide no ulterior motive; who act not for reward but because the act was true and proper within itself; whose heart and mind struggle to build character within the small self—these are the ones who understand the sixth golden precept of the Noble Eightfold Path.

And . . .

The seventh virtue of the Noble Eightfold Path is Right Mindfulness: Those who are thoughtful, who anticipate the needs of others, who meditate upon the needs of the Self; whose thoughts are always kindly and harmless, who do not tear down and dissect with the mind but rather dwell on those things which are constructive and positive and of use to others; who realize that thoughts are living things that can affect the mind of the less attentive and, in that knowledge, make effort to put out no thought that can do emotional or spiritual damage to another—these are the ones who understand the seventh golden precept of the Noble Eightfold Path.

The Noble Eight-Fold Path is not a particularly easy path to follow. The child's patterns are usually well defined and deeply rooted, having been generated and developed over a myriad of lifetimes. And let's face it, the personal mind doesn't like being nudged away from its chosen path of self interest. Not wishing to give up its prerogatives, it often rationalizes "I am what I am and I just can't change," conveniently ignoring the fact

that it is *constantly* in a state of flux. But what has been built can be torn down . . . one simply has to move with rational persistence. The Buddha gave the Noble Eightfold Path as a way to do just that.

In summary, for all the personal self's protestations, the teachings of the Buddha were not harsh. He never suggested one couldn't have a loving relationship with another human being,⁵ only that basing that relationship on the expectation of *personal-needs-fulfilled* would undoubtedly bring pain sooner or later. It wasn't as though he wanted it that way; he was simply telling the truth of the matter.

In addition, his doctrine wasn't a ticket to annihilation and it didn't ask humans to stop living happy, useful, productive lives. All it suggested was that there is happiness and contentment other than the kind produced by the emotional ups and downs of the *lesser self*, and that there is a joy that comes with the successful stepping away from the efforts of the small self to satisfy its endless array of desires and perceived needs.

The Buddha preached a *change of focus* in life (something most child-selves don't want to do). He did not preach a *cessation from life*. He said, in the deepest compassion and regard for his fellow human beings, that by filling the personal complex's void with something of quality in a cosmic sense, the need for supports and bolsters from *out there* would lessen and the root cause of pain and suffering would cease to exist within the individual. The child-that-was-no-longer-a-child could then use well the things of the world without emotional and psychological attachment and, because there would be no longer any need for attachment, it would not feel the pain of the separation when the inevitable separation of *external-thing and self* finally came.

In looking back, I find it remarkable how much I learned from the death of my cat.

We've talked a lot about the illusory nature of all the things the child normally depends upon as it tries to build its world. One wonders what, in a nutshell, *is* Real and worthwhile?

⁵ Not only was a personal life in the ordinary sense not looked down upon, it was accepted and honored. As far as the Buddha was concerned, the *path of the householder* in which an individual raises a family and lives a "normal" life was generally believed to be a more difficult path than that of the ascetic.

Most all of the major world religions in the world teach that love is terribly important. The Vedic tradition goes even further.⁶ It maintains that when the Divine Mind thought the inner and outer worlds into existence, the *first thing to manifest* was Its deep Love for all of Its parts, all of Its creation. That Lovingness is believed to be the *first thrill*, that which underlies and pervades all things from the heart of the atom on up. It is considered to be quite literally the under-structure of the physical world we know, or think we know, and of the inner world we are yet to fully perceive and explore.

If that be the case, how does the *opposite* of love fit into the plan?

Again, from the Vedic view, the Divine Mind created within this bedrock of lovingness the mechanism from which little bubbles—artificial spaces of sorts—could manifest in a way that would allow duality to exist. Our physical universe is one of those bubbles.

It is in this universe that right and wrong can clash; where our relatively narrow concept of love is juxtaposed against the thoughtforms of hatred and anger; where there is up and down, black and white, the right and left hand paths. That duality is what allows Consciousnesses—you and me and all the greater and lesser Beings that inhabit this place—to exist, to experience, to choose, and hopefully to learn in a spiritual sense what it means to be responsible Awarenesses working *within matter*. And aeons from now, when all the Beings linked to the 40,000,000,000,000,000,000 plus stars in our universe have grown and expanded into their potential, the necessity for duality will be no more, the bubble will dissolve, and what will be left? . . . the Lovingness that upholds all things.

What we are looking at here is a metaphysical reason for the considerable importance all the Avatars—all the world teachers—have placed on being a loving individual. Love is one of the very few qualities that, when built into the self, is Real and lasting. Truly make it a part of the Self and it won't evaporate with the fluctuations of the stock market, or with the vagaries of fame, or when another decides it would be fun to smite you on the cheek. It is the one thing that, if developed within, will truly be yours. And because that is so, you can lose your wealth, your looks, your power, your position

⁶ The Vedas are the ancient Hindu scriptures that preceded the life of the Buddha. Many of the Vedic metaphysical views, this one in particular, are accepted in Buddhist thought.

in society, your family, your mind, even your body, but that loving selflessness you have made a part of your Being will continue to remain with you beyond time.

Put another way, when the child chooses to make lovingness and compassion a major part of its way of life, it begins to displace its emptiness with qualities of substance. As the self's emptiness diminishes, the child loses its need to attach itself to and bolster itself with props from *out there*. As attachment diminishes, the potential to feel pain when "things" are removed from it diminishes. Its world in a material sense begins to empty as its world in a spiritual sense fills, and as this happens the individual approaches what is called by Buddhists *the emptiness that is full*.

