

Sunyata, Emptiness, Reality  
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Let's begin with this morning's story. A monk sits outside his hut meditating in the moonlight when a thief creeps up out of the darkness. "Give me all you own!" he demands. Buddhist monks make it their practice to not have any possessions. They even receive food through the offerings of other people. This illuminates our dependence on the Universe for existence. This also allows the monk to experience the present moment. So, there the monk sits present to the soft light of the moon and the passing clouds in the sky. The thief on the other hand is desperate. He is driven to steal from others. Despite the monk's invitation to share the moonlight, he is not satisfied until the monk gives him something tangible, his clothes. As the thief descends with his prize, the monk sits naked and shivering. Instead of being angry or anxious, the monk feels compassion for the thief. He sighs and thinks, "What a poor man he is! I wish I could give him this beautiful moon!"

I must say that most days, I am more like the thief than the monk. My days are filled with grasping after things. Now I do not steal, but I spend a lot of time chasing things from papers to information to appointments to deadlines. I tend to rush up the mountain and back down again without pausing to look at the moon or I simply give it a passing glance on my way to another obligation.

Emptiness is about more than just stopping to look at the moon. Emptiness is the realization that "I" am not separate from the world that surrounds me. Sunyata or Emptiness is a foundational principle of Buddhism. The English translation of Sunyata makes this concept even more difficult to comprehend. We think of "Emptiness" as not containing anything or without purpose. The Buddhist understanding of "Emptiness" is the opposite of nothing; it is everything and the space in between. It is the fullness beyond dualistic thinking where all is one. The Heart Sutra states, "Emptiness is form, form is emptiness."

How can this be? How can we hold this apparent contradiction? Let's stop and smell the roses. Here is a rose. No matter what our theological beliefs or political affiliation, no matter our race or language of origin, we can agree that this is a rose. How do we know that this is a rose? Through our senses: it looks like a rose. I am holding it and can tell you that it also feels and smells like a rose. We also know it is a rose by the collection of knowledge that we ascribe to a rose. Someone who is a botanist might be able to distinguish the exact type and name of this rose. A local florist might be able to recognize where this flower was purchased. Perhaps this rose brings forth memories of other roses in our lives—a rose given to you by a lover; the rose laid on the grave of a deceased relative; a few lines of Shakespeare may come to mind.

However, this rose does not have inherent existence. It did not arise suddenly and completely in this form. This flower is the product of all the other roses that went before

it. It was dependent on people who tended the conditions for growth and blossoming. Above all, this blossom could not exist without the elements of water, earth, air and light.

I would not be holding this rose this morning if it had not been for a conversation that I had with Chris Ariel. You would not be looking at this particular flower were it not for all the steps which brought you to this church. If any one of these factors was different, this moment would not have arisen.

This rose has no inherent existence. There is no essence of a rose beyond its relationship with all that is and was and ever will be. This rose is impermanent. Even as it was growing and blossoming, it was passing away and the elements that make up this rose will not disappear but transform into soil and energy and our perceptions of this moment.

As it is told in the tradition of Zen Buddhism, one day the Buddha silently held up a flower in front of his disciples and one of them smiled. Through this simple act, what is known as the Flower Sermon the disciple became enlightened. There was a transmission of all the Buddha's teachings. The disciple's understanding arose not because of scripture or practice but through direct experience. Unlike this one, the flower sermon did not depend on words. The flower is an expression of reality, the way things are in this moment. At the same time, the flower also is impermanent. This flower will soon fade.

That is why we human beings gather flowers around us during times of transition. Of course, flowers are beautiful and smell fragrant but they are precious because they are fleeting. As a couple exchanges vows during a ceremony of union, flowers decorate the space. As we bid farewell to a deceased loved one, flowers are brought to honor them. Unitarian Universalists use a white rose to bless babies to honor the fresh promise of new life. Lovers often give flowers as an expression of romance. We bring flowers as a sign of comfort to those who grieve and to express our prayers of healing for those who are ill. Flowers decorate our chancel every Sunday when we gather for worship. Flowers are placed on altars of the world's religions.

Why? It is more than custom. Flowers are a part of transitions and religious practice because they impart an essential truth. This moment is sacred. This moment is transient. This moment deserves our reverence and attention.

Sunyata or Emptiness teaches that the same is true of us. According to Buddhist principles, we have no inherent existence. There is no essence of a person beyond our relationship with all that is and was and ever will be.

The application of this teaching means that there is no such thing as a permanent or discrete self. The various schools of Buddhism through out history have analyzed and debated about the elements that make up a human being. Like the rose, we arise from causes and conditions. A child is dependent on her parents for life. Like the rose, we also arise from a collection of knowledge. Our identity comes from the name we are

given. Our knowledge is derived from the lessons we encountered. Our behavior is conditioned by our environment. Our bodies are a product of our genes, food, and exercise.

Even though our minds tell us who we are through our ego and what others say about us, truly we are a composite that is ephemeral. Our bodies, thoughts, dreams, feelings, are in a continual process of change. At the same time as we are dependent on everything, everything is affected by our thoughts and actions. We are all part of a process called dependent co-arising. Unitarian Universalism calls this “the interdependent web of life.”

Why does this teaching matter? The Buddhist principle of Emptiness is important because it reminds us of an essential truth that we are all connected. Often we become separated from this truth, like the thief stealing the monk’s clothes. We chase after the objects and desires that we think will bring us fulfillment or happiness. In the story, it is the monk who sits without any clothes experiencing the moon who is fulfilled. More than the thief he is able to connect with the other person, inviting him to know the beauty of existence.

Now, I am not suggesting that we all take off our clothes and sit in Touro Park gazing up at the night sky! That is more apt to land us in jail than in Nirvana. Instead I would offer this....

We often get into trouble when we are unaware of the myriad phenomena giving rise to our most immediate experience. My husband, Peter, often jokes that our mental state while driving is a great indicator of our progress toward enlightenment. When we are driving we are surrounded by individuals each entrenched in a chaotic dance of causation. Very rarely do we know why that person cuts us off or runs the red light. Is it urgency based on a work deadline? Racing to pick up a child? A wife in labor? A loved one in crisis? Bladder tension? Intentional disregard for others? Or maybe just the desire to get home in time for Oprah... In this web of existence of which we are a part, so often we do not know and cannot know the answer.

So during the week ahead I would like to invite you to keep an eye out for emptiness. As you go about your week be mindful of all that had to happen and is happening in order to give rise to this very moment. See what happens when you make space for this awareness, when you look for relationship and interconnection.

Instead of looking at life as an observer, like a movie of characters and settings out there, be mindful that you are a player deeply connected to what you are experiencing. So, if you are angry, allow yourself to notice, I am experiencing anger, “What gave rise to this moment?” If you are in pain, allow yourself to truly feel the pain and in doing so that moment may be transformed. Each moment is an opportunity to be with what is: the moon, the rose, someone who crosses our path. Don’t worry if you miss something, because another opportunity arises now.

The Buddha means the Awakened One. When Gautama arose from meditation under the Bodhi tree, he touched the ground saying, “The earth is my witness.” Then he taught that all people have Buddha-nature. Each one of us is perfect and complete; we have moments when this truth breaks through our awareness. We also can also live with intention. When we are mindful of our interconnection, pain is transformed to joy, anger gives rise to compassion.

*[Hold up the rose]*