

Traditionally, emptiness refers to the fact that phenomena have no “intrinsic existence.” This means not that phenomena don’t exist but that they don’t exist as we think they do, as freestanding, independent, solidly real entities. This is as true of us as it is of the world around us: everything is contingent, not solid, ceasing the moment it arises, moment after moment. Everything is like space, real in its own way, and absolutely necessary, but not something you could put your finger on.

We, of course, don’t know this. We are, according to the emptiness pundits of Buddhism, deeply ignorant of the one thing we should not be ignorant of: the real nature of ourselves and the world we live in. “Ignorance,” unfortunately, doesn’t mean we don’t know. It would be better if we didn’t know. Ignorance means we know something very firmly, but it is the wrong thing: we know that things are solid and independent and intrinsically existent. But they actually are not. So ignorance is not not-knowing; ignorance is a form of knowing, but it is a mis-knowing. And spiritual practice is the process of coming to see our mis-knowledge and letting it go: to begin to experience, accept, and live the truth about how we and the world actually are. When we begin to understand and to live in this way, there is a great decrease in the fear and dread, so common in human experience, caused by the huge gap between our expectations and the way things actually are. With an appreciation of the empty nature of things, there are no more foiled expectations. There is a lot more joy, peace, and love.