



The Wise Brain Bulletin

News and Tools for Happiness, Love, and Wisdom

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A Philosophy of Emptiness

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Excerpted from [*A Philosophy of Emptiness*](#).

These two excerpts come from a recently published book *A Philosophy of Emptiness*. The experience of emptiness is usually a state of lack or loss of meaning that we could perhaps link to the First Truth of the suffering that is to be known, and whose cause, misunderstanding and desire, is to be extinguished. Rather than filling this sense of emptiness with distraction and consumption as our present culture encourages us to do, a *philosophy* of emptiness helps us to acknowledge impermanence, contingency and the tragic sense of life and prosper on a middle path between denial and mindless distraction and a nihilistic loss of value. As a concept, emptiness, as presented in the non-dual systems of Taoist and Buddhist teachings, may be a resource for those in the West now adrift with the challenge to many traditional beliefs and certainties. Allied to practices of attention and mindfulness it may provide a path to happiness that is healthy and resilient. The first excerpt comes from the beginning of the book, the second from the end. Between lies a wide exploration of ideas and experiences of emptiness from many different domains and times.

Greetings

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A true expression of emptiness might be a blank page, yet a philosophy of emptiness must travel further, explore deeper, engage with language. There is a visual and affective difference between our response to the space of an empty page and to a block of text – a space in which to reflect or something with which to engage. Is your response to the space one of respite or irritation? To the text, relief or resistance? Do you embrace the emptiness or rush to fill it? Do you welcome silence or run to turn on the radio? Our response to emptiness is experiential and subjective. I think that one's initial and maybe continuing natural reaction to emptiness may depend on whether you are a half-full or half-empty type of person. I hope to show that a philosophy of emptiness may provide ways to temper our initial or even dispositional tendencies. It may offer an alternative view to challenge the conventional supremacy of substance and the seen, leaving in its wake a greater attention to what is often overlooked, the shadows and traces that are never absent from the empty page.

Between the experiential reality and our attempt to evade or to make sense of it, there is a gap, a distinction, and space for choice. Another gap opens between the term emptiness, which in English, unattached to some substance that something is empty of, is unfamiliar, even uninviting, and a philosophy of emptiness that I will attempt to show may resonate with interesting and helpful echoes from many fields of enquiry. I hope in the following pages to journey through these gaps, exploring the landscape as we travel.

Emptiness may be experienced as empty of absolutes, empty of permanence and empty of independence yet not empty of existence and of meaning. Emptiness as insubstantiality may provide an alternative to our philosophies of substance; a middle way between is and is not and the stark choice between existence and nothingness. Empty space may be space for possibility and for contemplation, just as silence may hold an opening for quiet and the potential for sound. On the other hand emptiness may be experienced only as meaninglessness, as utterly devoid, and totally nihilistic.

A brief trawl through dictionaries, compendia of quotations and thesauri quickly demonstrates the privative understanding of emptiness in the English language. ‘Void of contents, want of substance, inability to satisfy desire, vacuity, inanity’ are but a few definitions of emptiness given by the Shorter Oxford Dictionary, the Oxford Dictionary of Quotations provides empty hearts, empty glasses and the empty words of a dream, whilst Roget’s Thesaurus points to ‘bareness, void, vacuity, vacancy, hollowness, shell, no man’s land, waste and desolation’ amongst its list of synonyms. As a word, emptiness denotes lack: as a feeling, anxiety. However, a deeper more contemplative, more philosophic enquiry may allow us to move from raw feeling and conventional usage to a broader consideration that takes account of both lack and what is lacking, and what perhaps encompasses both, that may lead to an understanding that without emptiness there can be no fullness. Privation or potential. Embrace or evasion. Exploring such ideas we may follow a trail that is both familiar and strange.

In the vast space of emptiness, I want to start here with the experience, from there to move on to consider the word and concept and its translation from East to West. Then I will reflect on practice, exploring philosophy in the earliest Greek use of the term as love of wisdom,



with the intention of a path to the good life and I shall consider practices of attention that supported such philosophy. From this existential beginning I will turn to the philosophies of emptiness, travelling back in time and eastward in space, to Buddhism and Taoism, two ways of thought and practice that very early produced the most comprehensive understanding of emptiness and paths to engage with it. After this I shall stay in the past but turn back from the Orient towards our own culture in the West to follow traces of emptiness. In so doing we may uncover some little considered byways in the history of ideas and the roundness of the world. While echoes of Taoist and Buddhist concepts and practices of emptiness are to be heard early on in Hellenistic philosophy, they are relegated to the margins of a history predominantly dictated by Christian beliefs, and it is more generally not until centuries later, towards the second half of the nineteenth century, that emptiness reappears as a considered trope in western traditions. However, from this time onwards in all branches of culture we find collapse of earlier authority and presence that open up into emptiness and loss and also possibility. The later chapters of the book will consider the echoes of emptiness in our modern and contemporary culture. Here often we find description rather than prescription and the delineation of emptiness as loss, rather than the teaching of comprehensive ways to



deal with that breakdown of transcendent certainty. Yet we shall also see here pointers to possible paths through the openness that is revealed.

Emptiness in the contemporary West is commonly considered, if at all, as a blank, a lack, an absence of some-thing. The experience of emptiness at its most naked and negative is a cause of anguish and it is not difficult to believe that much of Western religious and philosophical thought has gone about the task of erecting structures to defend ourselves against that apparent lack; gods, grounds, beliefs, absolutes and ideal forms stand to block our view of contingency. For emptiness is a profound human experience: 'Why is there something rather than nothing?' It is the first existential question. All myth and religion have been a response to the way man finds himself already 'thrown' into the world, in Heidegger's term. Gods, grounds and 'Truths' have been set up as barriers or defenses against nothingness, meaninglessness, and horror vacui. It is not until such defenses have begun to be questioned, that the trope of emptiness and the question of loss of faith and of living with contingency, appear regularly in Western culture.

Philosophies of emptiness arise in times of change. They arise from our struggling to find new ways to live. When philosophic and religious ways of life have relied upon beliefs, and those beliefs are challenged or vitiated, through scientific knowledge and political or social change, there are three main choices of response that are central to discussion of philosophies of emptiness. We can either find another subject of belief, knowing now that this view may be as susceptible to change as the previous one; or in the face of all evidence to the contrary, we may choose faith over reason, holding to faith in our old belief in a fundamentalist fashion in defiance of all evidence; or we may contemplate change and impermanence themselves rather than the beliefs that hold them at bay. Philosophies of emptiness are those that come from this third choice. Very often, rather than appearing as fully fledged theories, the traces of emptiness first appear in art, in literature even in science as we struggle to find a philosophy that can acknowledge emptiness and loss of authority without pitching into a blank nihilism.

The deification of the sun that returns each morning, of spirits underlying natural features, of a god in the shape of man, all present attempts to explain life, to defend ourselves in different places and historic times against a life empty of meaning, a life without some kind of transcendental necessity or guarantor. Man is the only creature who is conscious of his inevitable death; who, aware of his finitude, is future-oriented and seeks for meaning outside

his own life. Our inevitable physical death remains the most unspoken topic of our daily life, yet is unavoidable and casts its shadow. It is this shadow and this understanding that we will see expressed in the work of many of the modernist cultural figures, such as Rilke, Beckett, and Heidegger, who no longer subscribe to the solace of religion and those philosophies that have traditionally been the preeminent methods of defending ourselves from the anguish that this causes. And while we might find that most philosophy or religion provide an escape or defense against the feeling of emptiness, a philosophy of emptiness will proceed through an embrace of contingency.

It may be that cultures that embrace without difficulty a sense of non-duality deal best with the concept of emptiness, as they can hold the mutuality of lack and what is lacking. Buddhism and Taoism are two early Eastern ways of thought that present a considered 'philosophy of emptiness' in which emptiness is seen in a significantly different manner. It is an interesting, if incidental and perhaps rather frivolous fact that research into fuzzy logic, a logic of more or less rather than on or off, maps neatly onto a map of the Buddhist world. Such research was funded late in the West, only after the value of its technological application in the world of white goods, washing machines, dryers and suchlike, had been demonstrated in the



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countries of the East. According to Bart Kosko in his interesting and amusing exploration of the topic in his book, *Fuzzy Logic*, multivalent fuzzy thinking comes from the Buddha and the Western bivalent viewpoint from Aristotle. Shades of grey versus black or white.

Paradoxically, both Taoism and Buddhism, in particular the one fully formed and explicitly argued philosophical exploration of emptiness found in Buddhist

thought, present a philosophy that is not one of lack. Japanese philosopher Masao Abe has pointed out that the West in general gives priority and superiority to being over non-being, whilst in Taoist and Buddhist thought the idea of nothingness is ultimate. Thus their philosophies of emptiness, though somewhat distinct from one another, arise from an encounter between positive and negative principles that have equal force and are mutually negating and mutually confirming. This and the fact that in Eastern thought this understanding of negativity is considered not only as an ontological issue but also an existential and soteriological one, gives rise to a view, or more importantly a way, of emptiness that transcends every possible duality including that of life and death, transcending and embracing both emptiness and fullness.

When emptiness has been considered so fully, a path may be seen to open up through contingency; that, embracing contingency, goes beyond it into suchness, the acceptance of reality in all its richness and uncertainty, and leads to a way of living well in the face of chance. Emptiness may be filled with defense and diversion, or it may be explored, found serviceable, and even played with, all of which I hope we may find exemplified in the following investigation. This distinction between embrace and evasion is so significant that deep consideration of this philosophy might make us question whether emptiness is the right translation for the term commonly translated thus. It may also, perhaps more importantly, make us reconsider wider ideas of emptiness, the existential reality that is reflected in so many areas of contemporary culture.

If one attempts a web search for ‘philosophy of emptiness’, thousands of entries arise, by far and away the majority refers, in one way or another, to Buddhism, and obviously this philosophy of emptiness will be explored below. Here I just want to consider the very term sunyata (shunyata) in Sanskrit that is usually translated as ‘emptiness’. Its root is the Sanskrit svi or sva, which denotes hollowness and swelling, as of a seed as it expands. Thus Buddhist emptiness in its very etymology holds a hint of fullness that is lost in its English translation. In a contemporary commentary to one of the key texts of Mahayana Buddhism, the Heart Sutra, Mu Soeng points out that in Sanskrit language, sunya (shunya = empty) was also the word chosen for zero, a concept that came into being with the great Sanskrit grammarian Panini around the 4th century BCE. Zero, he says, is a round circle with nothing inside, denoting the ‘essential contentlessness of the phenomena. In other words, manifestation without essence’ (Soeng 2010).

Even in English the usage of emptiness as a noun is misleading. Emptiness is not a thing, nor even a state of being. It is perhaps a state of becoming, a process, part of a verb – of an emptying out or being empty of something, and like every other thing lost without a context,



without the world of everyday reality, of the things that other things may be full or empty of. The manner in which we reify it and abstract it is an example of the very psychological tendency that the Buddhist philosophy of emptiness is designed to mend; that is - the manner in which we endlessly try to solidify and grasp onto our experience, to make of the slippery and ever-changing process of life something solid to which we can cling, which will give structure and meaning to contingency.

To translate the term as “The Void” compounds the problem, making it not only into a noun but a proper noun, a thing with transcendent and mystical properties, an absolute, another defence against chance.

We can only save ourselves from these mistakes, say Buddhist texts, by acknowledging ‘the emptiness of emptiness’, the understanding that emptiness too is contingent, dependent and contextual. Once we make a dogmatic ‘belief’ of emptiness, we have set up another false god or illegitimate transcendent, just as many of today’s atheist writers can only be described as evangelical in their atheism. The true path of emptiness, as I hope I shall be able to show, almost sneakily attempts to evade any such attempts to pin it down to anything more than the ever-changing kaleidoscope that is reality.

There have over the years been other attempts at translation that might evade this misconception,



‘openness’, ‘transparency’, ‘momentariness’, ‘transitoriness’, ‘nowness’ (Soeng 2010), and perhaps most interestingly ‘relativity’ (Stcherbatsky 2011). However, it is ‘emptiness’ that has pervaded, and so we must just look closely into its early usage to see what is intended by the term. The one early and profound philosophy of emptiness sees it, as we shall see in more detail later, as the other face of suchness, reality as truly understood. Its teachings then present a way to comprehend how things really exist and how we may live more happily in conformity with such understanding. That something is empty of essential lasting identity, allows it to be changeful, moving, dependent upon an ever-altering web of causes, conditions and linguistic designation. This seems both very different and far richer than mere lack.

Once one starts to peer through the spectacles of emptiness, one can find its traces in the strangest and the most familiar of places in our contemporary world, particularly in the sphere of the arts. The play of silence and sound, substance and space, emptiness and fullness will, I hope, weave in an illuminating manner through these pages. A philosophy of emptiness concerns a considered response to experiences of emptiness. There is the way of avoidance and the way of attention.



I began this writing from the theoretical perspective of a grounding in Buddhist thought and the experiential one of working as a psychotherapist. Exploring the wider resonances the idea of emptiness has become more and more replaced in my thinking by the idea of openness; that is openness to contingency and a challenge to all philosophies of essence, foundation and being. Many days spent writing in California in a hillside garden that on winter mornings looked out into nothing but mist, giving the feeling of living within a Chinese ink painting, provided me with an apposite image. The process of emptiness and the fullness of interdependence is complicated, more a misty intertwining than an either/or.

A philosophy of emptiness should provide an acceptance of contingency, and a way to live with uncertainty, similar perhaps to poet John Keats' negative capability, a way to live an engaged and meaningful life despite or rather within unknowing. A way that avoids the seductions of certainty. Yet within uncertainty we need some guidelines even as we speak of the end of metanarratives. As I was coming to the end of writing this book, in a dialogue between two philosophers concerning *The Future of Religion*, I came across this:



There are no facts only interpretations . . . the end of the metanarratives is not the unveiling of a “true” state of affairs in which the metanarratives “no longer are”; it is, on the contrary, a process of which, given that we are fully immersed in it and cannot regard it from outside, we are called upon to grasp a guiding thread that we can use in order to project its further development; that is to remain inside it as interpreters rather than as objective recorders of facts (Vattimo and Rorty 2005).

I see emptiness as that guiding thread that may helpfully keep us from closure yet steer us through indeterminacy on the middle path between is and is not, in the understanding that experience, existence and language are all thoroughly relational, plural and interconnected.

If the concept of emptiness appeared initially alien to Western sensibility, perhaps now we can acknowledge the value of this strangeness as a new lens through which to see things afresh. Emptiness has nothing to do with nothing. Paradoxically emptiness rather than being negative may act as an antidote to loss of ultimate foundations if it is considered, as presented in early philosophies, together with its belief in interdependence. Stephen Batchelor has perhaps expressed it most neatly, speaking of ‘the emptiness of necessity and the embrace of contingency’ (Batchelor 2005). The definition of contingency is: depending on something else. Happening by chance. Tathata, suchness. The infinite movement of things, the way the world worlds. Existence and experience.

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The Time is Now

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THE TIME IS NOW

is not, as it sounds, a call to battle or even, as I
fantasize, a threat to shape-up-my-life.
Imagine Richard III actually living in
Time as Now, rather than Time Future.
Or even Queen Elizabeth with her Armada and
her mandate to save England and the Tudor Crown.
Could she be present for the victory, or did she have to
plan-for-tomorrow even in her greatest triumph?
Could Heloise and Abelard writing their love to each
other daily, from their separate monasteries,
live in the moment and have it be enough? My mind
concludes that even the Great and Famous have
a hard time choosing Now over Anywhen. Yet I,
this very moment, mesmerized by the red-winged blackbird
claiming the bird feeder from the grosbeak, willingly
trade my Anywhen for Now.

Anywhen
tempts me with the glory of cash and prizes in the future. Or
punishes me with shame and anger at the memory of past
defeats. It shockingly seduces me with drama and desire.

Now holds...well ... only

Now.

Time stops at Now.

For The Time Being

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In the search for happiness and peace, people often talk about their longing for more time just to 'be.' They feel lost in a whirlwind of rushed days and sleepless nights. Never enough time. Not enough space to stop and rest, take a walk, sit awhile and talk, share in the dreaming and laughter and healing, or even just take a deep breath. There's always something else (much more important) to do.

So where has all the 'be-ing' gone?

In our contemporary society, great value is placed on 'doing' regardless of the motivation or ripple effects or the cost. Multi-tasking. Mass production. Racing against the clock. Eating on the run. Proving our importance with busy-ness. Buying and consuming more and more and more stuff.

We don't have to dig deep to see what's been generated by the incessant pressure to achieve/build/accomplish/win/control/accumulate more. We harm ourselves and our planet with so many of the actions we take. We end up stressed, fatigued, anxious, depressed, fighting against ourselves and each other, searching for someone or something somewhere out-there to fill up the emptiness inside.

The thing is, there's nothing wrong with 'doing.' It's essential, in fact. Life is a dynamic field of movement and momentum. Interactions, relationships, growth, transformation, and change are always at play. The web of life is alive with activity.

Yet, as humans, we've isolated the doing and hoisted it high on a pedestal. What we do defines us and provides evidence of our worth. We've split being and doing into an either/or proposition. And when the doing is what really counts, there'll be little if any attention ever given to experiencing, respecting, learning about, accepting, and nourishing our own and others' being.

Perspectives on Self-Care

Be careful with all self-help methods (including those presented in this *Bulletin*), which are no substitute for working with a licensed healthcare practitioner. People vary, and what works for someone else may not be a good fit for you. When you try something, start slowly and carefully, and stop immediately if it feels bad or makes things worse.

My curiosity about our human hunger for more time to 'be' has drawn me to the earth - to see how other beings go about doing what they do.

And here's what I discovered in my own backyard: Being isn't something that's gone missing or must be scheduled in. To do the doings of life, no one leaves the being behind.

Whether the juniper trees are pollinating, or the coyotes are on the hunt, or the songbirds are building nests - it all begins with the being. And from there, the doing naturally flows. There are countless forms and functions and actions, richly diverse rhythms and cycles and pace, within the individual beings and among them collectively, every day and every night, throughout the changing seasons.

It's so apparent that even with all the unencumbered 'being' going on, nobody's not doing their part. Rather, everybody's being their part - in their unique personal dance on the planet, in their connection with the vast web of life.

It's kind of simple, really. When we are in time being - present, aware, centered in who we are - the doing naturally flows from the inside out with balance, creativity, clarity, and ease. In the ways of the earth, the being and doing are inseparable. They can't be torn apart. Our being and doing are interwoven and co-existing. That's how we flourish and thrive.

In our human searchings for more time to 'be,' there's a hunger for reweaving our vital connectedness...

with our very own self, our whole being;

with natural cycles and rhythms and pace;

with doing what we love to do;

with doing all that we do with love and choiceful presence;

with authentic ways of relating, unconditionally accepting - our children and grandchildren, parents, lovers and friends, everyone in line at the grocery store, the oceans and sunsets, the nations at war and the peace-makers, the faraway stars, the soil beneath our feet, the trees in our own backyard.

And from deep inside this connectedness - being our being any time any place - the choices we make and the actions we take will naturally be guided by the purpose and passions of our aliveness. This is an entirely different existence than building a life and filling our world with stress, judgments, depletion, and fear.

So side-by-side with the junipers, coyotes and nesting birds, we will live our time being (rather than endlessly searching for it). We'll free ourselves up to be-and-do what we've come here to be-and-do, for real, while participating, co-creating, and relishing our connection with the extraordinary web of life.

So here's to filling up the hunger and finding the wholeness in the time now being...You.

Being Love.

Being Peace.

Being Happy.

Being Free.



When Passion is the Guide

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There are always changes going on - in the shifting seasons of the earth, in our personal and collective lives. Whether planned or unexpected, change involves endings and beginnings, the dismantling and rebuilding, the death of what has been and the birthing of the new.

Though change is ever present in the natural flow of life, we tend to fear and fight against it. We struggle to hold onto what's known and familiar while longing for something fresh, dynamic, and new. Endings tend to get fueled by anger, disconnection, and disappointment. Beginnings often evoke fears of unknowns, doubts about survival, questions about which direction to go.

So how do we find our way?

Lean Into the Ending

Every change is a death of sorts. And life is a ceaseless flow of change. So to really live, it's essential we befriend death and honor the transformations that unfold in every moment, in our own bodies and beings, in everyone and everything, everywhere in the world around us.

My dad, in his dying, was a great teacher about accepting death and courageously going-with the momentum into this significant change. So was Jasmine, my four-legged friend. With both of these loved ones, I didn't want to miss a moment, I didn't want to miss a breath, as they made the passage from this world to the realm of spirit. Instinctively, I dove

deep into the sharing of their journeys, offering companionship and care, even though this was new territory filled with not-lived-before experiences.

Leaning into the ending - really being there, connecting with it. Witnessing. Learning. Feeling the feelings. Exploring the mysteries. Accepting all the messiness. Finding the magic. Breathing love.

Lean into the ending and join up with the dance of life. Awaken gifts sacred and beautiful beyond words.

In this present time in your life, what endings and completions of cycles are happening? Lean in, with all the courage and acceptance you can gather up. Take a close-up look and see what you see, without any judgments, without any fear. Acknowledge with deep respect whatever is dying away, whatever is no longer needed and ready to be let go.



Love What You're Letting Go Of

In the natural movement through transitions, letting go is an expression of love. Pure love. This is the organic way of life on the earth, which we often forget we're inherently part of. To help us remember, there are countless brilliant guides very close by, readily within reach.

Just take a look at the trees.

When it's time for the trees to drop their leaves, they don't release them with resentment, regret, or a sense of failure. They don't shrug them off with anger and disrespect. The leaves have been birthed by the trees, beloved by the trees, essential for gathering rainwater, synthesizing sunlight, protecting and nourishing life.

When the purpose has been served for this particular form of relationship, when the cycle is complete for this certain way of being, it's naturally time for the letting go. Guided by the earth's shifting seasons and the knowings carried within, trees make ingenious intentional internal changes which allow the leaves to fall away.



This is not about withholding and withdrawing love. Rather, the process is infused with beauty and grace, with loving appreciation for all that has been. With such exquisite ease, the trees' letting go is colored with purpose and shared understanding.

With clear and loving endings, boundless energy is freed up to move into the next cycle, to pursue whatever now fully supports the flourishing of life. Nothing is stuck or blocking the way. Remnants from the past aren't weighing things down.

So love what you're letting go of - clutter in the closet, addictive patterns, particular foods, completed projects, money given to pay the bills, an illness, old ways of relating with yourself and others, limited beliefs about the world and your dreams.

Surround yourself, everyone else, the history and the circumstances, all the letting go, with love. Pure Love. This awakens peace, allows genuine feelings to flow, and creates wide open space for the new.



Let Passion Be Your Guide

Change is a passage, a journey through a doorway leading from what has been into something not-yet-known. Heading right into the mystery can be rather daunting and fear-filled. So what carries us through? What compels us to open doorway after doorway after doorway of change?

If we reach beyond the fears and the shouldn'ts and the shoulds, we'll find the passion of our hearts calling us, guiding the way. The desire to live fully. The creative adventure of our aliveness. Reaching toward our potentials. The hunger to flourish and thrive.

Like the salmon swimming upstream hundreds of miles, tenaciously finding their way home.

Like baby birds tapping open eggshells, boldly leaving behind the only world they've known.

Like a butterfly coming out of the chrysalis, readying to fly into an entirely new life.

Unstoppable uninhibited Passion. Let this be your guide.

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Since 2000, **JoAnne Dodgson** has been living and learning the kala keh nah seh lineage of Ka Ta See, a tradition from the Eastern Andes. A shamanic healer and teacher of these



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Fare Well

May you and all beings be happy, loving, and wise.