

Brahmavihāra and Emptiness: Six-day online practice course

Video lecture transcription

Video Lecture 3 – Emptiness 1: Perception of Boundless Space

Welcome. This is the first of altogether four talks I want to give on the topic of emptiness practice. This first talk, I want to give an overview of the discourse, the *Cūḷasuññata-sutta*, that is the basis for this practice, and then I will be talking about the first step.

Maybe the best place to start is actually to say what this is all about. I think this is all about the way we normally construct experience. This is something, there's an overlapping understanding between early Buddhism and modern psychology. We know from modern psychology that there's a way of how we construct our own experience. This has to do with the way of facilitating quick reaction. Imagine a situation, you're some, like a Neanderthal, and you're walking through the jungle and suddenly something is in front of you. You have to be very quick to decide - this is big, it's going to eat me, or this is something I can eat. The faster you decide, the higher your survival chances. And, in order to facilitate this fast recognition, our processing of data is constructed in such a way that when we see a few things, the mind constructs the rest. It assumes, oh this must be such and such a thing, and fills out the picture very quickly. Because that is faster than waiting for all the data through the senses to come in. As a result, there is a whole underlying tendency of the mind to construct experience, to make things appear to us the way we think they should be – but it seems for us that this is actually out there, this is actually the way they are. And so the underlying pattern here is that we project our own expectation, and also our own biases and prejudices, onto what we think is outside as the external world. And these emptiness practices, this gradual entry into emptiness, is inviting us to gradually step out of that construction of experience – and to gradually lead us into the experience of the total deconstruction, the unconstructed, *Nibbāna*.

And, in the discourse, this is the *Cūḷasuññata-sutta*, the Shorter Discourse on Emptiness in *Majjhima-nikāya*, this takes a series of steps. And we have a parallel in Chinese and in Tibetan, which help us sort out that there is probably a transmission error that happened in the course of oral transmission. Towards the end of the Pali version, we also get neither-perception-nor-non-perception. And comparative study makes it quite probable that this is an error. That this has come in, this is very natural because not only we get the four immaterial spheres one after the

other – boundless space, boundless consciousness, nothingness, and neither-perception-nor-non-perception – because the reciters were so used to this sequence – in a discourse where we have only the first three, it is very easy that they accidentally also brought in the fourth. So the neither-perception-nor-non-perception, I'm going to leave that out based on my comparative study.

The discourse starts off with the forest, perception of forest and perception of earth. Perception of earth is the principle of solidity, and those of you have done the *satipaṭṭhāna* practice with me, you are familiar with the kind of body scan that I like to use for the contemplation of the elements. Contemplation of the elements would be a natural entry door into this emptiness practice, the gradual entry into emptiness in the *Cūḷasuññata-sutta*. And that could be done by starting with the earth element, and then dissolving each element into the next. Earth element, solidity, depends on cohesion. Without cohesion things would not be solid; they would be like quicksand. Water element. Water element, to perform the principle of cohesion, depends on temperature. Has to be the right temperature, otherwise water evaporates or becomes ice. Fire element. Fire element, fire is a question of motion; heating things up. Wind element. Wind element needs space. Space element. So there's a way of building up the perception of space, perception of boundless space, by moving through the elements.

However, my personal preference for practicing and teaching is to go through the *brahmavihāras*, because the *brahmavihāras* have such a powerful contribution to make to emptiness practice, through providing the foundation. So bringing us this kind of personal integration and balance that is needed to face the emptiness practice, and also through giving us a foretaste of what we are actually practicing, what we are actually aiming at. The *brahmavihāras* can be seen as embodying what it means to be an awakened one, because that is how awakened ones relate to the outside world, through *mettā*, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity. And, there is a very nice similarity between the fourth *brahmavihāra* and the first step into emptiness in the way I teach it, which is boundless space. These two experiences are so close that the shift from the one to the other is almost not a shift, it's just a shift of perspective. There's very little that needs to be done there. This is why I personally really prefer and recommend that we go through the *brahmavihāra* entry door, if you like. And another advantage is also, when we have gone through the emptiness practices, particularly when we come to emptiness through not-self – and then we go back to *brahmavihāra*, the *brahmavihāra* practice changes substantially. The emptiness gives a depth and profundity to the dwelling in

the *brahmavihāras*. And also, I would call it purity, because we drop selfing and ego. So there's a very powerful feedback, mutual reinforcement between these practices.

You might just, for your own interest, try out the element approach, just so that you know. Scanning through the body for earth, water, fire, wind, space – just to have an idea of how this operates. But as the main modality I would really recommend to go through the *brahmavihāras*.

The idea of emptiness that stands behind the teaching, the *Cūḷasuññata-sutta*, is always “empty of”. It's not a, emptiness is not a *thing*, something that we reify. It's a qualification. You might say it's more an adjective than a noun. It has always, “this is empty of”. So, the first step that, coming through the *brahmavihāra* door, will be relevant for us is the step of boundless space. And that leaves behind the earlier two, forest and earth. And the understanding is that this experience is empty of the earlier two - *not* empty of exactly the one we are doing right now. So it shows a kind of like a stepping out, but at the same time, it wants to make sure that we don't latch on to the tool we use for that stepping out. None of these experiences is the final goal. They are pointing to something else. And this is, in fact, I think it's a key to keep that in mind.

And this is in fact the one of the two problems that can come with emptiness practices. One of these is that we reify the meditative experience we have – sort of like, ‘wow! I got it!’. You missed it right there. As soon as we latch on to the experience and think we really got it now and want to hold onto it, we missed out on the most crucially important thing of emptiness: not appropriating things. The second one is that we misuse emptiness practice for becoming aloof – mistaking equanimity for indifference. That second problem is being taken care of by going through the *brahmavihāra* door. If we come through the *brahmavihāra* door, we have developed the *brahmavihāras*, this second problem will not pop up. And the first problem, the reification problem, is taken care of by that very procedure in the *Cūḷasuññata-sutta*. So the key point is *less* the actual experience – boundless space, whatever it is – *more* the understanding of what that signifies. The significance of boundless space is that we have left behind all weariness, all troubles, all vexations related to materiality. We are dropping off the whole material side of experience. This is not an ontological statement, but a soteriological strategy. What I'm saying is, this is not a truth statement, it's a tool for meditation practice. However much I practice space, I still can't walk through the wall. And that's not the point, to confuse, to get confused in this way. The point is simply to see that I am bring in another way of perceiving the world. Just even now as you look at me, or you look at someone else, normally we never notice the space

between ourselves and the other person. It's there but we just move through and towards another person. We normally don't notice the space in a room. And we especially don't notice that material things, whatever sort of things there are, they are also made up of space. In fact we know from modern physics that these things are 99.999999% just space. A few quarks buzzing around. And so in order to complement our ingrained way of solidifying things, we bring in this alternative perception. Not saying everything is really only space; but look at it as space, in order to counterbalance. And with the understanding that, look, people get so excited about material things – they want to possess, they want to own, they fight, they go to war about a piece of earth here, wanting to have this territory or that territory – it's so much trouble in the world from this solidification of things. And we're stepping out of all that. We're stepping out into an experience of just space. And with that understanding, and the understanding that, having left behind those other wearinesses related to materiality – there is still weariness left, which is precisely that perception of boundless space.

See again, this non-reification, non-latching on teaching, is always there. If you keep that in mind, then the perception of boundless space can have a very powerful potential of bringing us, of offering us a different way of seeing the world, and of how we relate to it. Somebody getting angry at us – if I can just be aware of the space between me and that person, and the space is naturally broadening to the sides, my mind doesn't clamp down, and get into that same angry mode and hits back. But it stays open. I'm not letting the other person do whatever they want with me, but I'm also not fighting back. I can just stay there and be open.

Another thing is when we have defilements or hindrances come up in the mind. There can be the way of fighting with them, but if we just make space, and we become one with space, in a way, the defilements have no ground to stand on. The hindrance has nothing to step up and affirm itself. It just can evaporate into space.

Another one is pain. Making space around pain can help us to make this crucial transition from "pain" to "sensation". The unpleasantness of the sensation will still be there but the perception of pain is no longer there, and that takes out a large part of what is afflictive about pain. So there's quite a, quite a potential in playing with this perception of space in different ways.

In the meditation practice, what we'll be doing is to simply move through the *brahmavihāras*, with the awakening factors, and then, just have this different perspective on the experience of

boundless equanimity – and to see it as boundless space. And then abide in it. And then relate it to the awakening factors. Mindful of boundless space. Investigation if there's some solidity somewhere in this experience. Finding there is none, then one is very equipoised. We see the potential and the pleasantness of that experience, we get energized, want to do it, continue it longer. And from there we come to a natural tranquility. Space has this quality of not being established anywhere. This is an instruction to Rāhula in the *Majjhima-nikayā*: space is not established anywhere. So there's nothing to get unbalanced or agitated; naturally tranquil. This joy, subtle joy, but the subtle joy of letting go of materiality, of this weariness. And then concentration. The mind concentrated in the experience of boundless space.

So that is basically what we will be doing in the meditation practice. And this is about what I had in mind as an introduction. So, basically, to wrap it up again. The main thrust of these emptiness practices: the deconstruction, countering the construction of experience. We'll be using four steps, taken from the *Cūḷasuvāṇṇasutta*: boundless space, boundless consciousness, nothingness, and signlessness. The entry door to these is the *brahmavihāras* as a way of providing the ground, and also in a way, sharing the fruition of these practices. The key to the transformative potential of these meditative practices is not just the perception. In fact, the perception of boundless space can also be developed as a concentrative abiding based on the fourth jhāna, even though the sutta clearly speaks of the perception, not of the attainment. And that is not necessarily leading to a realization of emptiness. The realization of emptiness, the transformative potential, comes from the understanding that such and such weariness has been left behind – this experience is empty of this and that – but what is still there, that is precisely the weariness left, the non-emptiness left. If you keep that in mind, these practices can be incredibly transformative.

Thank you very much for your attention.