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From Philosophy to Practice: Understanding and Teaching the Buddhist Concept of Emptiness

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Abstract. In contemporary materialistic and disillusioned society, there is a growing sense that learning Buddhist philosophy offers a necessary path towards enlightenment and meaning. Experiential teaching emerges as a pedagogical approach with significant potential resonance with core Buddhist tenets. This paper explores the application of key Buddhist philosophical concepts, specifically emptiness (śūnyatā) and non-self (anātman), within the framework of experiential teaching methodology. It investigates how this integration fosters deep understanding and personal transformation in learners.The analysis reveals a profound synergy. Experiential teaching, particularly the teacher's role as a "clear mirror" facilitating non-judgmental reflection, directly embodies the Buddhist principle of non-self. This approach effectively supports learners in identifying attachments and problems within their experiences. The core finding is that integrating the reflective process of experiential learning with the philosophy of emptiness provides a powerful and transformative method for teaching this concept. Learners not only grasp its theoretical meaning but also achieve inner realization and practical application. Consequently, this integrated framework significantly contributes to modern education by promoting profound personal growth, cultivating awareness and compassion, and guiding learners towards the wisdom encapsulated in the "Perfection of Wisdom" (Prajñāpāramitā).

Keywords: Emptiness, Non-self, Experimental Teaching, Buddhist Philosophy, Personal Transformation

1. Introduction

In Buddhist studies, śūnyatā (emptiness) has long been examined through doctrinal frameworks, such as the Tiantai's "Five Periods and Eight Doctrines," and Huayan's "Five Doctrines and Ten Tenets," and the multiple enumerations of emptiness in the Prajñāpāramitā Sūtras [1, 2]. Despite extensive textual analysis, traditional transmission methods—primarily oral teaching and rote learning—rarely employ experiential learning strategies. This paper addresses this pedagogical gap by integrating Mahayana principles of emptiness with experiential teaching methods.

From a Mahayana perspective, emptiness is grounded in the principles of impermanence and non-self, emphasizing the transient and insubstantial nature of all phenomena. As Gethin notes, human suffering arises from failing to perceive impermanence, grasping at phenomena as if they

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were permanent and capable of providing lasting happiness. Such misperceptions are reinforced by coceptual proliferation (prapañca/papañca) and the mistaken attachment to one's view [3]. Experiential education, which engages the six sensory faculties through structured, immersive activities, offers a practical means to address these vognitive tendencies. By directly encountering the impermanent and interdependent nature of phenomena, learners can recognize attachments and conceptual distortions in real time.

The foundational logic of those activities is to understand the concepts of impermanence and non-self within śūnyatā, with the ultimate goal of achieving the Perfection of Wisdom, a key element of Mahayana Buddhism, which privileges the path of the bodhisattva [3]. The present study contributes an innovative, practice-oriented Buddhist pedagogical model, facilitating wisdom (prajñāpāramitā) and non-attachment through direct experiential reflection [4].

2. Philosophical foundations and cognitive framework of emptiness

2.1. Impermanence, non-self and suffering in mahayana buddhism

Buddhist philosophy emphasizes the "three makrs of existence": impermanence (anicca), non-self (anattā), and suffering or unsatisfactoriness (dukkha). "While suffering applies only to sentient beings, non-self applies to all existents, in the sense that everything is without permanent and independent substantiality." The Mahayana Buddhist perspective further develops this insight into the doctrine of "emptiness of self-nature": "nothing exists independently; the existence of all things depends on causes and conditions; everything is fundamentally interconnected." This view, central to the Perfection of Wisdom Sutras and the (Nāgārjuna)'s Madhyamaka school, forms the philosophical foundation of Mahayana tradition" [2].

2.1.1. Impermanence

Impermanence is not merely the idea that all things are subject to change but a profound understanding that of existence is constantly in flux. As Barlingay explains, "the entire phenomenal world is in a state of perpetual flux, where nothing exists independently or permanently" [5]. This realization undermines the illusion of any eternal or immutable essence and highlights why cling to permanence leads to suffering. Recognizing impermanence helps individuals transcend this attachment, avoid the unnecessary suffering, and develop genuine detachment and equanimity [5]. Impermanence further serves as a foundation for Buddhist practice, especially Perfection of Wisdom. From the conventional standpoint, phenomena arise and perish; from the ultimate view of emptiness, no inherently existing "things" can be found. This twofold understanding provides both theoretical and practical basis for inner peace and spiritual liberation [5].

2.1.2. Non-self

Non-self (anātman) denies the existence of a permanent, independent self. As Collins explains, what we call "self" is "a mere collection of impermanent physical and mental processes" [6]. The detachment from "self" reduces suffering and fosters liberation. Thus, the concepts of impermanence and non-self fundamentally shape an individual's understanding of emptiness. A person who comprehends emptiness does not adopt a passive attitude toward life; rather, they cultivate an active, optimistic, and altruistic mindset. From the perspective of non-self, Altruism, from this perspective, is an extension of self-awareness: helping others benefits oneself as well, aligning with karma and planting seeds for future well-being. For example, in one classroom exercise, participants learned

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that the "Last One" badge—initially seen as a mark of shame—could also symbolize responsibility or honor, illustrating how attachmentd often arise from their subjective views [7].

2.1.3. Suffering

Suffering (duḥkha) is central to Buddhist teaching and is systematically framed within the "Four Noble Truths" [3]. It defines the nature of suffering, its origins, cessation, and the path leading to its cessation, serving as a diagnostic framework and a roadmap for liberation:

Suffering arises from attachment, aversion, and delusion. These mental defilements distort perception, bind beings to the cycle of rebirth (saṃsāra), and perpetuate dissatisfaction. As Gethin notes, "For Buddhist thought suffering is simply a fact of existence, and it is beings themselves who must take ultimate responsibility for their suffering" [3]. Recognizing and addressing these defilements is a crucial step on the path to freedom.

To overcome suffering, the Buddha prescribed the Noble Eightfold Path, a set of practices that encompass ethical conduct, mental discipline, and wisdom. These include: (1) Right view: Understanding the nature of suffering and the law of dependent arising; (2) Right intention: Cultivvating intentions of non-attachment, benevolence, and harmlessness; (3) Right speech, action and livelihood: Adopting ethical behaviors that reduce harm to oneself and others; (4) Right effort, mindfulness, and concentration: Developing the mental clarity and focus necessary for insight and liberation. From the teachings outlined in Gethin's work, practical steps on the path to liberation involve mindfulness practices, such as observing one's thoughts and emotions without clinging, and meditation techniques aimed at cultivating calmness (samatha) and insight (vipassanā). This path requires individuals to actively engage with their suffering, take personal responsibility for their actions, and strive for mental clarity.

The realization of impermanence (anicca) is integral to overcoming suffering. As Davis argues, "If things had unchanging essences, there would essentially be no growth and development, and thus no possibility for liberation from delusion and suffering" [2-4]. By internalizing the impermanent and interdependent nature of existence, individuals can dismantle attachments and move toward liberation.

Together, impermanence, non-self, and suffering shape the Mahayana understanding of emptiness. Recognizing that all phenomena are impermanent, lacking a fixed self, and inevitably linked to suffering helps individuals develop compassion, equanimity, and wisdom. Rather than promoting passivity, this realization fosters an active, altruistic lifestyle grounded in correct views (samyag-dṛṣṭi), guiding practitioners toward spiritual liberation.

2.2. The six consciousnesses and their extended framework

2.2.1. Normal six consciousnesses

Buddhist philosophy explains human perception through the doctrine of consciousness. According to the Foxue cidi tongbian (The Sequential Compilation of Buddhist Studies), the six consciousnesses arise through the interaction of the six sense bases (ṣaḍāyatana) with external stimuli, collectively referred to as the "six objects" (ṣaḍviṣaya). They are: (1) Eye consciousness (cakṣurvijñāna): Awareness of visual forms; (2) Ear consciousness (śrotravijñāna): Awareness of sounds; (3) Nose consciousness (ghrāṇavijñāna): Awareness of smells; (4) Tongue consciousness (jihvāvijñāna): Awareness of tastes; (5) Body consciousness (kāyavijñāna): Awareness of tactile sensations; and (6) Mental consciousness (manovijñāna): Awareness of mental objects or thoughts.

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Together, these six consciousnesses encompass the abilities of seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, and thinking, and are sometimes collectively referred to as the "six affections" [8].

2.2.2. Expanded framework: the eight consciousnesses

The Yogācāra (Vijñānavāda) school elaborated an expanded framework of eight consciousnesses to address deeper aspects of awareness and cognition: The first six consciousnesses correspond to sensory and mental perception, quicking registering sense impressions and reacting with attraction or aversion.

Discriminative consciousness (manas): coordinates thoughts and sensory information received from the first six consciousnesses, and is capable of reflecting, considering, and making judgments. The nature of manas is neutral but obscuring; therefore, mana will be innately contaminated by defiling afflictions" [9]; Storehouse consciousness (ālayavijñāna): Acts as the repository for the seeds of past karma (karmabhījas)—the accumulation of tendencies shaped by greed, hatred, and delusion. This consciousness forms the underlyingbasis of human experience and interacts continually with active consciousnesses according to the principles of dependent arising. While it maintains a semblance of continuity and identity, it is not a self, but a flow of ever-changing causes and conditions [9].

2.3. The interplay between the six consciousnesses and emptiness

Buddhist teachings emphasize that "All beings possess the innate wisdom and virtues of a tathāgata, but delusion and attachment prevent them from realizing it. By returning to the pure consciousness, one attains Buddhahood" [10]. As the Mahāyāna Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra states, "One's body as it is is the dharma body" [11]. Similarly, the Heart Sutra declares: "Consciousness is emptiness, and emptiness is consciousness" [12]. These perspectives highlight the inseparability of consciousness and emptiness, revealing the transformative potential of the mind when guided by insight into emptiness.

(1) The Six Consciousnesses as Dependent Origination: The six consciousnesses arise through dependent origination (pratītyasamutpāda), produced by the interaction of external stimuli, sensory organs, and mental awareness. For example, mental consciousness arises as a result of interactions with the preceding five consciousnesses [9]. Xuanzang's Verses Delineating the Eight Consciousnesses further elaborate on this interconnection and its role in constructing subjective reality [13].

(2) The Six Consciousnesses as Manifestations of Emptiness: The six consciousnesses serve as a clear example of the doctrine of emptiness. Their existence is fleeting and entirely dependent on constantly changing conditions, embodying the concept of impermanence (anicca). For instance, visual consciousness arises only under specific conditions, such as the presence of light and visible objects. This transient nature aligns with Vasubandhu's teaching that the six consciousnesses lack inherent self-nature (svabhāva). Moreover, the ephemeral quality of sensory perceptions underscores the reality that all phenomena are interdependent and impermanent.

(3) Emptiness as a Transformative Lens: While the six consciousnesses constitute human cognition, they also generate delusion when sensory experiences are mistaken for enduring realities. Emptiness serves as a transformative tool by helping practitioners reframe sensory perceptions as impermanent and interdependent phenomena. For example, recognizing that physical beauty is a conditioned and temporary phenomenon can help individuals reduce superficial attachments, fostering equanimity and liberation from such illusions.

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(4) The Dual Role of the Six Consciousnesses: In Buddhist practice, the six consciousnesses play a dual role. On one hand, they reinforce dualistic thinking and attachments, perpetuating cycles of suffering. On the other hand, through mindfulness and introspection, the activity of the six consciousnesses can serve as a means of insight into their emptiness. By observing the arising and cessation of sensory phenomena, practitioners can realize their impermanence and lack of inherent existence, transforming these realizations into opportunities for spiritual growth.

(5) Practical Applications in Life and Education: The relationship between the six consciousnesses and emptiness has profound implications beyond spiritual practice, influencing daily life and education. For instance, mindfulness practices and experiential learning activities—such as guided meditations or sensory awareness exercises—can encourage individuals to reflect on the transient nature of their sensory experiences. This fosters emotional resilience and enhances understanding of emptiness. As shown in Liao and Chien's study, the concept of emptiness positively impacts intuitive judgment and reveals its potential in modern educational practices [9].

By transforming the six consciousnesses, participants in experiential learning can gain a deeper awareness of the impermanent nature of sensory experiences. This awareness enables them to transcend attachment to the "self" and approach their true nature, ultimately achieving the state of Perfection of Wisdom [3]. As expressed in the text, "they come to me whether I wish for them or not. But in each consciousness process, the mind has a choice in how it will react to the experienced object" [3]. This is absolutely aligned with what Clark said "At the level of manas, the delusion of I arises, because this reflects the illusion that there is someone inside who is in charge, making decisions, acting on my preferences, and consciously pursuing my choices" [14]. Through the six consciousnesses, the mind can choose whether to abide in a state of emptiness, thereby advancing toward Perfection of Wisdom. This capacity for choice indicates that such a state can be cultivated through training.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research design

This study employs the "Demons of the Heart" activity as an experiential teaching method to explore the Buddhist concepts of emptiness, impermanence, and non-self. The activity, with its unique experiential design, guided participants to transcend the limitations. The activity consists of two stages: structured experience and free exploration. By contrasting rules with the absence of rules, participants deepen their understanding of impermanence and non-self.

3.2. Participants

A total of 40 individuals participated in the event, all employed by a social enterprise in China—a mobile phone sales company—including staff from front-line, mid-level, and senior positions. The participants ranged in age from 20 to 60 years old, with a balanced gender distribution. Selection was based on voluntary registration followed by an internal screening process. During the activity, four participants (two men and two women) were randomly chosen on-site to take part in interactive sessions, while the remaining 36 individuals attended as observers.

3.3. Activity procedure

Phase 1: Structured Experience

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Recruitment and Setup: The facilitator recruits four participants (two males and two females) and positions them at the starting line of a designated passageway. The passageway, located between two rows of seats, is set up as the obstacle course. Volunteers place overturned chairs along the passage and instruct the seated audience members to extend their legs into the passageway to increase the level of difficulty.

Explanation of Rules: The facilitator explains the competition rules as follows: Rule 1: All four participants must complete the race; quitting is not allowed. Rule 2: Participants are prohibited from removing their blindfolds until they reach the finish line, and only volunteers may assist with removing the blindfolds. Rule 3: Participants must not kick or manually remove the chairs when their feet make contact with the obstacles. Rule 4: If physical collisions occur during the race, participants must not push others but may adjust their strategies to navigate through.Rule 5: Participants must stay within the designated passageway and cannot bypass it by going outside.After confirming that the rules are clear, the facilitator equips the participants with blindfolds and encourages them to focus on their goal.

Competition Round: The race begins, and participants take turns attempting to navigate the obstacle course to touch the table at the finish line. The facilitator and volunteers observe the participants' behaviors, noting their strategies and responses to the obstacles.

Reflection and Sharing: Once the race concludes, the facilitator invites participants to reflect on their experience by answering the following questions: (1) "How did you think and act while navigating the obstacles?" (2) "Where do you think you placed in the race, and why?" (3) "How did you feel when you removed your blindfold and saw that the obstacles were not there?" During the discussion, the facilitator guides participants to review their actions and helps them become aware of their inner attachments and fears.

Phase 2: Unstructured Experience

Introduction to a New Experience: The facilitator announces a new condition: "This time, there are no rules. You may use any method to achieve your goal. The first person to touch the table will still be declared the winner."

Competition Round: Participants attempt the obstacle course again. The facilitator observes whether participants choose to adhere to the previous rules, explore alternative solutions (e.g., moving obstacles, collaborating, or finding shortcuts), or adopt other strategies.

Reflection and Sharing: After the second round, the facilitator encourages participants to compare their experiences by discussing the following questions: (1) "Without rules, what was your initial reaction?" (2) "Were you faster in achieving your goal? How does this relate to your inner state?" (3) "How do you understand the relationship between rules and freedom? Are rules helpful or restrictive?"

3.4. Key considerations

During the competition, the facilitator must closely monitor participants' safety, especially during the blindfolded and unstructured phases, to prevent falls or injuries. Ensure that the guiding language is both humorous and precise, alleviating participants' tension while encouraging deeper reflection.During the reflection phase, avoid judging participants' behaviors as "right" or "wrong." Instead, guide them to explore their inner attachments and limitations.

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3.5. Data collection and analysis

Data was collected through on-site oral feedback during the sessions and written reflections submitted after the course. Oral responses were transcribed, while written summaries provided deeper personal insights. The qualititative data were analyzed using thematic and textual analysis to identify recurring themes, patterns, and meaningful constructs allowing for a comprehensive understanding of participants' learning experiences and outcomes.

4. Results and analysis

The “Demons of the Heart” activity yielded several significant insights into the transformative power of Buddhist emptiness. Participants’ reflections revealed a progression from recognizing internal obstacles to cultivating compassion and applying Buddhist wisdom in daily life. The findings can be organized into six interconnected themes:

(1) The Nature of Obstacles: From Attachment to Emptiness

Participant A: "What is the hardest thing to confront? Undoubtedly, it is the deepest knots hidden in one’s heart. My own painful experiences and repeated failures at self-redemption had gradually made me inferior, fragile, and cynical. " Participant C: "During the “chair game,” I realized that one must not be constrained by their own habits and patterns of thinking."

The participants' reflections highlight that the core of obstacles lies not in external conditions but in internal attachments and rigid thought patterns. Participant A's struggles stemmed from an obsession with past failures, while Participant C realized through the game that breaking free from habitual thinking can unlock new possibilities. This understanding aligns with the Buddhist teaching of "emptiness," which emphasizes that all obstacles arise from inner attachments and can be overcome by letting go.

(2) The Wisdom of Impermanence: Balancing Rules and Freedom

Participant C: "When the teacher announced, "There are no longer any rules," the immediate reaction should have been to remove the blindfold and stride boldly toward the destination. " Participant B: "The curriculum of True Self Discovery I to III integrates the traditional values of sincerity, self-discipline, family harmony, enterprise governance, and public service with modern Western management tools such as goal setting, action planning, time management, the five disciplines of learning, coaching techniques, Enneagram personality types, communication artistry, and adversity quotient. This fusion makes the True Self Discovery series a deeply enriching program, one that offers lifelong learning and benefits. "

The design of the activity, with its structured rules in the first stage and their removal in the second, vividly demonstrates the Buddhist concept of impermanence. Participant C's experience illustrates the importance of quickly adapting to changes in the environment, while Participant B highlights the necessity of employing flexible tools to respond effectively. These insights reflect the wisdom of impermanence: by understanding and adapting to change, one can achieve stability and freedom amidst uncertainty.

(3) Self-Awareness: Finding Breakthroughs Through Non-Self

Participant A: "Buddha said: "A single thought can make one a Buddha or a demon; light and darkness are but a thought apart." When I finally summoned the courage to challenge the demons in my heart, I discovered within myself a tremendous strength." "My companions in the class were like mirrors reflecting my own shadows. I could empathize with their transformations and breakthroughs. " Participant D: "Courage, self-breakthroughs, spending quality time with family,

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and learning to let go of things that should be released—these are among the most precious insights I've gained."

Participant A shared that by confronting their inner demons, they gained a profound awareness of their inner strength, while Participant D realized the importance of breaking through personal limitations and letting go of attachments. These realizations align with the Buddhist teaching of non-self, which emphasizes that much of human suffering arises from an over-attachment to the self. Recognizing the concept of non-self allows individuals to transcend inner constraints and achieve liberation.

(4) The Limitations of the Six Consciousnesses: Reflections on Sensation and Reality

Participant A: "When the doors to my heart began to slowly open, I thought of the people who had been unconditionally supporting me throughout my life: the family members who loved me without expecting anything in return, the friends who stood by me through thick and thin, and the colleagues who weathered the storms with unwavering loyalty." Participant C: "During the "chair game," I realized that one must not be constrained by their own habits and patterns of thinking. "

The insights shared by Participants A and C reveal the inherent limitations of sensory perceptions. Participant A's reflection on unconditional love highlights the fact that sensory inputs often obscure deeper realities, while Participant C's experience shows that overcoming sensory limitations opens up new perspectives. These experiences reflect the Buddhist critique of the six consciousnesses as incomplete and often misleading sources of understanding. True awakening lies in transcending these limitations and seeing reality clearly.

(5) Gratitude and Altruism: From Attachment to Compassionate Elevation

Participant A: "For this, I am deeply grateful and will not let them down. I will face life with courage and live with strength." Participant D: "gratitude toward my colleagues, friends, family, and clients. I've learned to communicate with sincerity and empathy, to view issues from others' perspectives. Instead of resorting to blame or complaints when faced with challenges, I now strive to find practical solutions."

Participant A emphasizes a shift toward bravery and resilience, while Participant D underscores the importance of empathy and heartfelt communication. These reflections align with the Buddhist ideal of compassion, where self-centeredness gives way to a focus on benefiting others. Gratitude becomes a bridge to cultivating a compassionate mindset, allowing individuals to achieve inner fulfillment.

(6) Sustained Value: From the Wisdom of Emptiness to Practical Action

Participant B: "The curriculum of True Self Discovery I to III integrates the traditional values of sincerity, self-discipline, family harmony, enterprise governance, and public service with modern Western management tools such as goal setting, action planning, time management, the five disciplines of learning, coaching techniques, Enneagram personality types, communication artistry, and adversity quotient. This fusion makes the True Self Discovery series a deeply enriching program, one that offers lifelong learning and benefits." Participant B's feedback demonstrates that the lessons learned from the course extend beyond the classroom and serve as a lifelong guide for personal growth and professional success. By integrating the wisdom of Buddhist emptiness with practical tools, participants are empowered to achieve harmony in their personal and professional lives, fostering both individual growth and societal contributions.

In summary, the "Demons of the Heart" activity enabled participants to deeply internalize the wisdom of Buddhist emptiness, finding balance between rules and freedom, obstacles and breakthroughs, self-interest and altruism, and self-awareness and connection with others. By addressing core Buddhist principles such as impermanence, non-self, and emptiness, the activity

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guided participants through a journey of transformation—from confusion to awakening, and from attachment to transcendence. This process not only enhanced their personal and professional capacities but also instilled their inner growth with profound Buddhist philosophical significance.

5. Conclusion

In today's world, dominated by materialism and eroding ideals, it is easy to find scripture teachers but difficult to encounter true mentors who guide and inspire the human soul. Teachers capable of utilizing experiential teaching methods are already few and far between. Even rarer are those who deeply understand the Buddhist concept of emptiness and employ experiential teaching to serve this as a goal to help students achieve transformative learning. To find one or the other is rare enough; to find both combined is even rarer still.

However, experiential teaching, which aligns with the scientific principles of the learning cycle and the Law of Competence, should be widely embraced by the education community. Moreover, experiential teaching has the unique advantage of embodying the characteristics of Buddhist emptiness, which elevates its pedagogical value. This synergy positions experiential teaching at a higher plane, making it an ideal approach to integrate with the Buddhist theory of emptiness to educate and enlighten students.

In the fast-paced, efficiency-driven lifestyles of modern society, the immersive nature of experiential teaching acts as a counterbalance, a "flavor enhancer," encouraging people to pause and reflect. It slows the rhythm of life and creates opportunities for deeper engagement and learning. Having devoted myself to mastering both Buddhist emptiness and experiential teaching, I believe I have the ability and responsibility to promote their integration.

As Vasyl Sukhomlinsky (1918–1970) said, "Teachers are the engineers of the human soul." Inspired by this, I aspire to become such an engineer of the human soul. My aim is to succeed in "continuing the heart of heaven and earth, establishing the purpose of life for the people, carrying forward the lost teachings of past sages, and opening peace for all generations.

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