

# TRANSLATIONS



*A Rightview Quarterly Feature of Original Translations*

DOING  
ALL  
KINDS  
OF WORK  
WITH AN  
EMPTY  
MIND



**A** PREVIOUSLY UNTRANSLATED DHARMA TALK BY  
**AJAHN BUDDHADASA**, TRANSLATED BY **SANTIKARO** WITH  
EDITING ASSISTANCE FROM **JO MARIE THOMPSON**

We have spoken of emptiness metaphorically as a special kind of power or force that can look in any direction. We spoke of a certain hermit with fiery eyes. In whatever direction he looked, with his fiery eyes popping out, everything would be burnt to a crisp, completely cleared. I'd like to use this as a metaphor for understanding emptiness.

The language of legend and myth always has deeper meanings. The power of a fire that can incinerate everything in all directions can never compare with the power of emptiness. Fire is an ordinary material thing that burns up only material stuff, creating merely material vacancy. It can't burn anything mental or spiritual.

Here we're speaking of matters relating to consciousness, so something able to incinerate or destroy everything must include mental matters. This power is the emptiness that is void of all feelings and thoughts of "me" and "mine," of ego, which are mental phenomena. That hermit's special power can be used to harm others, but to harm others for one's own benefit is fundamentally selfish. In our case, as we aspire to unselfishness, to destroying all selfishness, we don't seek any particular benefits from anyone. This distinction is of tremendous importance.

**“Doing any kind of work with hopes of getting something in return is a matter of *me* and *mine* that we are so familiar with we don’t even notice it.”**

***Don’t Assume Clinging is Always Present***

Wanting what’s good for ourselves, generally considering only ourselves, makes it impossible for us to understand emptiness. To study emptiness for selfish purposes, for building up our egos, for the sake of “me” and “mine,” makes genuine understanding impossible. Unable to understand it, there’s no way to practice it, because we fail to see that unselfishness is essential for the sake of not having any self.

Merely seeking for our own personal benefit, there will be little understanding when studying or hearing about emptiness. It will sound contradictory and confusing. For example, there’s the often-raised objection, “If there is no selfishness, then who will do any work? What will motivate people to work?” Ordinarily, the ability to observe goes no further than this. When such obstacles confront us, even such superficial ones, interest wanes. We give up trying to understand emptiness and toss it away, throwing out the baby with the bath water.

We may also object, “without clinging, there are no hopes and needs.” That might seem theoretically correct, but it’s a misunderstanding. This is because the meanings of words like ‘desire,’ ‘hope,’ and ‘wishes,’ are ambiguous, as is so often the case with language.



We tend to assume that we are always thick with defilement, that clinging is continuously occurring. Should anyone say “do your work without clinging,” it’s considered crazy or ridiculous. To understand this matter, we must review the fact that this heart-mind is regularly empty of clinging. Such emptiness is the mind’s foundation. Clinging only arises occasionally and temporarily.

To practice, when we’re doing anything important, we’re careful to prevent clinging from arising. As soon as we’re absentminded, it’s born again. If we’re careless, clinging arises. But here, in a place dedicated to study-practice, we ought not to be absentminded because there’s enough time to consider and reflect, and therefore there is no excuse for being careless. Whenever we think of doing something, it’s not just some emotional reaction. There’s time to think, consider, and prepare oneself. Therefore, please follow the principle that this heart is fundamentally free from clinging. It’s more skilful to employ this awareness of “free mind,” even for those who still believe that they have defilements and that they are clinging to something or another all the time.

***Work Must Be Practice***

Work is an important problem for most of us, because we work to live. We can say our life has value because of work. This makes it a most important issue for us. Consequently, I like to focus on work as a crucial issue. Here’s a verse I asked the publishers to print on the back covers of our monastery’s *Looking Within* series:

***Do work of all kinds with  
an empty heart,  
Offer the fruits of work to voidness,  
Eat the food of voidness  
as the saints do,  
Die to one’s self from the very  
beginning.***

The tricky part of this verse is the phrase “empty heart.” This is something we’ve spoken of many times, and in great detail, so you can read about it on your own [See *Heartwood of the Bodhi Tree*, Wisdom Publications, 1994]. What’s most important, what you must understand completely, is that these words have their own special meaning. They are not the ordinary language of people who’ve never studied or reflected deeply on these matters. Consider

## "NATURE CREATES US WELL ENOUGH FOR WHAT'S NEEDED."

it “Dhamma language” that requires special explanation. The phrase “empty heart” (or “free mind”) does not mean, in the way that many would assume, the kind of heart or mind that doesn’t think at all, like the kind of person who lacks intelligence. If mind is empty in the sense of not thinking at all, it’s not really different than sleeping. In that case, one couldn’t do anything useful. Further, there’s the case of “faking” emptiness. If one fakes it, or just puts on a show, then it’s what we call “delinquent” or “criminal” emptiness. If one just fakes emptiness without understanding it and merely seeks some personal benefit, such as avoiding responsibility, we call it “criminally empty mind.”

Here, there’s a specifically Buddhist meaning that specifies a heart-mind void of all kinds of thoughts and feelings connected with any meaning of *me* or *mine*. Those thoughts and feelings, which are concerned and connected with *me* and *mine* are extensive. These need to be observed, studied, and understood. If we don’t know such things, we’ll never understand emptiness. We ought to be industrious in trying to discriminate among the many thoughts and feelings that happen every day: which of them are empty — that is, empty of any sense of *me* and *mine* — and which are not empty.

The easier, most practical way to put it is that any thinking and feeling that is mixed up with greed, hatred, and delusion, are neither free nor empty. If there’s no admixture of greed, hatred, and delusion, then the heart is empty and free. ‘Empty thinking’ has no selfish feeling, and is not about or for one’s self. There is just pure, untainted awareness and intelligence, whether with or without thought.

### *Two Kinds of Intelligence*

It’s difficult to teach how to discriminate pure intelligence from intelligence which is enslaved to craving and defilement. Nevertheless, you need to observe this for yourselves and not just believe me. In other words, observe this difference in your own thoughts and feelings. You can also observe

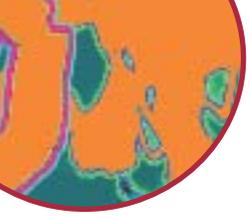
this in others who are skillful thinkers, observers, and investigators. Nowadays, as society blindly worships scientists, experts, and authorities, why don’t we consider some scientists and the science they research?

For example, we’ve all read about Darwin, who studied biology and the evolution of life. He obviously needed to use time to contemplate these matters deeply, just as sages and hermits do. He would observe animals carefully. He would lean on his cane in order to focus deeply, like a statue, until squirrels and birds would land on him. Consider the depths of such thinking, and how profound and penetrating that would be. Is it possible that his contemplation was mixed up with any meaning of *me* or *mine*?

Darwin forgot everything. He forgot himself, his name, where he was. He forgot how he felt, what he would get out of all this, and what his other duties were. He forgot everything and his mind was completely buried in nature. It’s as if he disappeared and there was just nature. All meaning of *self*, of *me*, of *mine*, was gone. His mind became completely natural. He was able to contemplate nature most profoundly, according to its actual properties. Thus, he was able to penetrate to nature’s secrets and see the aspect of natural truth he discovered. This is one example of working with mind free of *me* and *mine*.

Einstein is another example. He’s widely considered the leading genius of his time for the way he was able to use his mind. Everyone knows what he discovered, which required a deep, penetrating mind able to investigate nature and be one with it. In such contemplation there’s no room for the least sliver of *I*, of *me*, of *self*, of self-interest, of benefiting or losing, or any such thing.





No matter whether one is a thinker, a researcher, or an experimental scientist, each must work with an empty mind. If the least hint of ego sneaks in, things fall apart immediately.

Whenever a sense of me and mine gets mixed in, it's impossible to be aware, to think, to contemplate anything deeply. Instead, one thinks of success and failure, personal benefit, status, honor, profit, and the like. This thinking with me and mine is anxious and restless. When it occurs, whatever one is doing fails. Egoistic thinking always confuses and messes things up by getting in the way of the concentration needed to look deeply into the secrets of nature.

### ***Natural Duty for Its Own Sake***

The *me* and the *you* need not play a part anymore, leaving only one's natural duty and doing that duty for duty's sake. Thus, one can work with an empty mind — free of *me* and *mine*, of profit and loss, of success and failure — a mind most sharp, profound, and penetrating. Such a mind is just like having eyes of fire

## **IF THERE'S NO ADMIXTURE OF GREED, HATRED AND DELUSION, THEN THE HEART IS EMPTY AND FREE.**

that instantly incinerate whatever one sets them upon. The empty mind sees through everything, just like the magical hermit we mentioned at the beginning.

Nowadays, most people work with minds abashed and nervous. In general, whatever is being done we lack confidence and don't pay proper attention. We're worrying about whether we'll be successful or not, how much we'll be paid, and who will pay us. Our thoughts are concerned mainly with *me* and *mine*, which creates intense pressure and stress for us all the time. This is busy mind, which is the opposite of free and empty. Busy mind has trouble thinking things through, is unorganized, and confuses things.

Doing any kind of work with hopes of getting something in return is a matter of *me* and *mine* that we are so familiar with we don't even notice it.

When we set ourselves to work, even the most simple everyday chores, we must work with a void heart without any *me* or *mine*, without any *us* or *them*. There's just mindfulness, clarity, and wisdom. Then our labor will gather itself appropriately. Our strength is used wisely with a mind that is neither scattered nor sloppy, even in ordinary housework like dusting and mopping. This way there won't be any headaches for us and others, and the work no longer has the meaning of work; it becomes something pleasurable, like a hobby.

The trick of working with an empty mind is making our work enjoyable. When working with a busy mind, work is suffering. So by now you should understand that there are just these two ways of working: with an empty or void mind and with a busy mind. Working with an empty mind is difficult for ordinary people whose hearts are no longer fit. We were born with all the capacity we need but have lost it through improper training. This is why there are so few geniuses. It's not that nature stipulates some fixed rule that geniuses are rare. It's mainly humanity's own failure.

Nature creates us well enough for what's needed. It's we who create our own messes. We build characters that are neglectful, sloppy, and selfish, thinking only of *me* and *mine*, thinking only of deliciousness and pleasures. In the end our minds lack the strength of samadhi (mental concentration and stability). Without the necessary samadhi, there's no sharp, penetrating wisdom. Thus, it's so hard to find people like Einstein and Darwin. Such people are rare, and when they do turn up, they mainly explore material things. It would be wonderful if Einstein, Darwin, and others like them were to consider spiritual matters.

Now, to focus our attention upon the subject of quenching suffering. We've been born to end suffering. Consequently, we must turn all our hopes, desires, and interests toward spiritual matters, in ways that everyone can follow, so that nobody need suffer.



**As we aspire to unselfishness, to destroying all selfishness, we don't seek any particular benefits from anyone. This distinction is of tremendous importance.**

*Pure Joyful Work*

When it's time to put our hands to work, we must think it through from the beginning and fix our intention with certainty. Just go to work with empty mind, enjoy it, and don't wish for anything beyond the power of one's intelligence. Don't take on duties beyond one's own ability. Let one's ability develop first, then expand one's responsibilities appropriately.

The most important question and challenge is simply to work with an empty mind, with pure intention, and then to expand on that by offering all the results to voidness and eating the food of voidness. Returning to the verse, the second and third lines merely explain the first line. If we understand the first line and can practice it, the second and third lines won't be any problem.

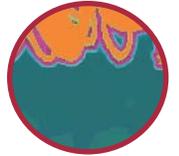
Once you're practiced in observing the difference between empty mind and busy mind, it's easy. The simple choice is between mindful, wise working and working with craving, egoism, and defilement.

What we're talking about has been discussed many times, has been memorized and repeated over and over again. Why is it that so few people benefit from it? Because most don't reach the level of "working mindfully with wisdom," which requires intelligence that is true and pure. The intelligence and wisdom we refer to is that which naturally exists in a heart void of *me* and *mine*. When *me* and *mine* arise in the mind, wisdom changes into something deceptive, clever, and cunning for the sake of *me* and *mine*. This is the kind of intelligence the world seeks and rewards – the wisdom of the market – which is nothing but cunning for the sake of *me* and *mine*, which deceives and tricks continually. Our world doesn't respect pure and honest wisdom.

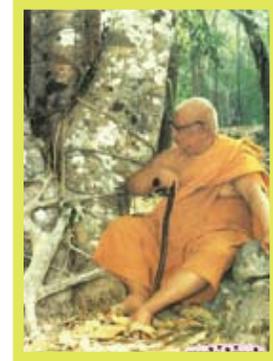
To have the fiery eye that sees all things as void, without any craving, clinging, or suffering, requires the knowledge that is wise enough to see even work as empty, so that it's no longer seen as work.

Destroy all the meaning of the word 'work,' and it becomes enjoyable play. One will be at ease and comfortable in such work. The boss won't have any headaches, nor will your spouse. Your employees won't be stressed out, nor will the people who serve you in stores and restaurants. This is the special meaning of my verse: *One ought to do all kinds of work with an empty mind.*

*Please reflect on this carefully, so that you have the special, secret kind of power like the hermit who can burn up all obstacles and foes with just a wink of the eye.*



**“Whenever a sense of me and mine gets mixed in, it’s impossible to be aware, to think, to contemplate anything deeply.”**



#### **AJAHN BUDDHADASA**

*Buddhadasa Bhikkhu (Servant of the Buddha) went forth as a bhikkhu in 1926, at the age of twenty. After a few years of study in Bangkok, which convinced him “purity is not to be found in the big city,” he was inspired to live intimately with nature in order to investigate the Buddha-Dhamma more directly, and so he established Suan Mokkhabalarama (The Grove of the Power of Liberation) in 1932. At that time, it was the only forest Dhamma Center and one of the few places dedicated to Vipassana meditation in Southern Thailand. Word of Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, his work, and Suan Mokkha are described as “one of the most influential events of Buddhist history in Siam.”*

*Ajahn Buddhadasa worked painstakingly to establish and explain the correct and essential principles of what he called “pristine Buddhism,” that is, Buddhism before it was buried under commentaries, ritualism, clerical politics, and the like. Progressive elements in Thai society, especially the young, were inspired by his teaching and selfless example. He provided the link between the scriptural tradition and engaged Buddhist practice today. Ajahn Buddhadasa died in 1993, two days before his eightieth birthday.*

#### **SANTIKARO**

*Santikaro is the founder and lead teacher at Liberation Park, a modern American expression of Buddhist practice, study, and social responsibility near Norwalk, Wisconsin. Santikaro established Liberation Park after extensive experience living and training in Thailand, which began when he served in the Peace Corps from 1981-1985; then from 1985-2003, he lived and trained as a Buddhist monk at Suan Mokkha forest monastery in Southern Thailand. There, he was abbot of Suan Atammayatarama and translated and edited Ajahn Buddhadasa’s **Mindfulness with Breathing**, and **Heartwood of the Bodhi Tree**, as well as other books.*

*For more information about Santikaro, please go to [www.liberationpark.org](http://www.liberationpark.org)*