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The Doctrine of Emptiness
Reflections of a Natural Scientist

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"Let us recall that the doctrines of emptiness, which above all form the foundation of Nāgārjuna's Mādhyamika, find their most extensive and profound elaboration in the sūtras of the Prajñāpāramitā. These essentially teach the development, taken to its extreme, of insight into the emptiness of things. Things – just like the five aggregates (skandhas), which provisionally constitute the existences of the visible and invisible, animate and inanimate universe – are empty of an inherent essence. The emptiness of an inherent essence in things implies the emptiness of their process and their dependent arising. Every change, every evolution, and every movement of the appearance and disappearance of things, which are empty of inherent essence, can themselves only be empty of inherent essence. All things are subject to non-arising and non-ceasing. Nothing appears, nothing disappears, nothing fundamentally decreases, nothing increases." (Yoko Orimo on Shōbōgenzō: Kuge).

As a natural scientist, I would express it this way: nothing arises from nothing and nothing passes into nothing. Likewise, nothing can increase from nothing or decrease into nothing. Rather, everything arises from something and passes into something. This corresponds to the chemical law of the conservation of mass. In fact, the arising and passing away of all forms, whether animate or inanimate, is nothing other than a permanent restructuring of matter. We humans – like all other forms – are composed of atoms that, since time immemorial, have moved from one form to another. Thus, the atoms of our bodies have previously existed in countless other forms, in humans, animals, plants, or in inanimate nature (atmosphere, sea, mountains, etc.). And it is there that they will mingle again after our death.

In the same way, on the material level, an intense and reciprocal interaction takes place between us and our environment. We breathe in air, take in food and water, and release transformed air, water, and waste products, just like all other living beings. In this way, we are an integrated and changing part of a constantly changing universe.

In a special and incomprehensible way, mind has developed from matter in human beings and enables them to attain a certain understanding of themselves and of the nature surrounding them. Humanity now contributes, to an unprecedented degree, to the acceleration of global changes, and it will require a very great collective self-discipline to prevent the human form of life from becoming merely a brief episode in the history of the Earth.