Introduction to Emptiness Retreat

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 49:27

Good evening, everyone. It's lovely to see you all here tonight. I see a lot of familiar faces out there, people who've spent many, many hours in this particular hall, and also a lot of new faces that I don't know and look forward to getting to know over the week together. The three of us are very excited to be here. We've been planning this retreat for some time, and it's a topic that we all feel a lot of enthusiasm about. So I hope we'll be able to share that enthusiasm and have a terrific week together.

My name is Guy Armstrong. I'm one of the teachers here at Spirit Rock. And on my left, this is Sally Armstrong. The last name is not a coincidence—we're married. And on my right is Gil Fronsdal, who's the head of IMC Meditation Center in Redwood City. People often get us mixed up by name. So just again, I'm Guy. This is Gil. Those three-letter words starting with G are a little too similar, so we'll keep stating that.

We've been planning this retreat for about two years, and this is the first in what we hope will be a series of retreats here at Spirit Rock. We want to have one retreat every year that is specifically for senior students—something with a little bit different subject matter, not just the standard Vipassana 101 retreat, which we have here a lot. This is the first in an annual series. Next year, the theme will be the Abhidhamma, and that will be led by Steve Armstrong. So something to look for and put in your calendar if that interests you.

But this is a theme that we particularly wanted to bring to the forefront, to share something that has been important in our meditation and our reflection. The topic of emptiness has been one of the central concepts in Buddhist thought for the last 2,500 years. Maybe if you had to pick one concept, it would be the most often mentioned concept over all this time. Even as Buddhism has gone through many different evolutions from the early days of the Buddha and the Pali texts into the early Mahayana sutras, the Prajnaparamita and the writings of Nagarjuna, through the later Mahayana, the schools of the Yogacara or mind only, Chittamatra, and then as it moved out of India into China and the concept of emptiness infused the Chinese understanding of Chan and later in Japan as Zen—this theme of emptiness has been there running all along, although its interpretation and understanding have also changed over the centuries as it's moved from one culture to another.

The theme was enunciated more strongly in the Mahayana, that is the later versions of Indian Buddhism that migrated to China, Japan, and Tibet. But the concepts, the key concepts, the primary concepts are all there in the Pali works as well. So in the teachings of the Buddha, in the commentaries of the Pali scholars like Buddhaghosa, the concept of emptiness is found, is clearly enunciated, is developed from a few different angles. So it's very much there within our tradition of the Theravada.

Over this week, we want to look at a number of different ways the word has been understood and used over the centuries, but we'll draw mostly from the Theravada, partly because that's the lineage that we represent here at Spirit Rock, and also because it hasn't been pulled out or described so extensively from our tradition here at Spirit Rock. So it's something we feel we can contribute to the overall Dharma picture in the West.

As the write-up of the retreat talked about, I hope everybody understood, we'll be looking at this topic both in theory and in practice. That means we're going to connect it to readings, and I hope you picked up a copy of the study guide when you registered. If you didn't, hopefully the retreat managers will have additional copies. There should be enough that everybody has one. And we would appreciate it if you would bring this, which will form the main basis of our textual study. Bring it to the talks and later as the retreat unfolds to the discussions that we have. This will be what we'll read or study from.

But we also want to connect it to our meditation practice. The purpose of learning about emptiness is to free our hearts and minds. It's not just to become smarter or intellectually clever. So we want to find out how these concepts can inform our understanding. And that happens through our meditative inquiry. So we're trying to structure the retreat in the way that will nourish the best of these two approaches, the study and the meditation practice.

If you've looked at the schedule, you'll have noticed that most of the day looks like a regular retreat of sitting and walking. But unlike a usual retreat, we're going to have two Dharma talks every day. One will be in the morning at 9:30, the other will be at 7:30 in the evening, which is sort of the usual time that we do talks here at Spirit Rock. And there will be times for questions around both of these talking periods.

So this will be the opportunity for us to stimulate some reflection and for you to start to play with the concepts that you want to feed into your meditation. But then the rest of the day will be in silence and will be a standard practice of vipassana or mindfulness.

So we want to try to find this balance where there's enough silence and quiet time that the concentration develops so that you experience that stilling of the mind that you associate with your retreat practice. But we also want to put in enough conceptual content that it starts to spark insight for you.

And in this way, we hope to balance the factors of enlightenment. We want to put a lot of emphasis into the second factor, which is investigation. And we also want to put a lot into the sixth factor, which is concentration. You could say the investigation produces some of the arousing alert energy and the stillness and the quiet will produce the calming. So this is the balance that we're trying to find in this format.

And we'll see how it goes. I don't want to say we haven't done it before, but we haven't done it quite like this before. So it's a little bit of an experiment and we look forward to your telling us how it's working for you.

When you stop and think about it, this word empty is kind of a funny word to put at the center of a religion or a philosophy. It's not that appealing a word, is it? For me, it conjures up ideas of an empty cupboard or a glass half empty or an empty house. And it has a little bit of a bare and bleak connotation in English. So I've always wondered, well, was that something that's just lost in translation? How can a central philosophy be built on a word like that?

But in fact, the word that the Buddha used and the word that's been used in generations after is basically a daily, everyday word that means the same as our word, empty. So, for example, you know that famous quotation of the Buddha where he's pointing in the forest and pointing out places for the bhikkhus. He said, "Monks, there are these roots of trees. There are these empty huts. Meditate or you'll regret it later." So the empty huts - the word used is the same word as for emptiness. The Pali word is sunya. The noun form is sunyata or emptiness. So it was an ordinary everyday word in the Buddha's time. It's an ordinary kind of everyday word in our time.

So the meaning of this word is explained a little bit on page one in your study guide. You don't need to read it right now. You can feel free to read it later when you go back to your room. But we wanted to give a little bit of a description or explanation on page one so that you can keep referring to that as the basic sense or meaning of the word.

So when the Buddha used the word empty to refer to aspects of our experience, what is it empty of? What's not there? And as a simple way to remember this, you might describe it as empty of a fixed or unchanging substance or essence. This is kind of the simplest or universal meaning that we'll come back to again and again.

This has a few implications because if you look at what we take to be a human being, how the Buddha described a human being, a fairly important part of what we look at in meditation, it's empty of something. It's empty of some fixed core, some abiding, unchanging entity at the center. If you look at the phenomena of the world that come through our six senses, they're empty of some kind of lasting substance also. So these are two important ways that we're going to be talking about this word empty.

And a third important way, which we also mentioned in this explanation, is the sense that the mind can become empty through letting go of things that don't need to be there. You know how often our thoughts are involved in drifting into the future or looking back at the past, and we construct senses of existing and belonging out of those thoughts of past and future? Those don't really need to be there. And as the mind gets simpler, more focused in meditation, there's an emptying process that goes on. And this is also another key point that the Buddha was pointing to.

But a lot of our exploration is going to be around this sense that the world is not the way it appears to be. And this is kind of the promise of emptiness, that it can reveal to us some kind of hidden truth about the way things are, about the way we take ourselves to be, about the way we take the world to be.

So part of our reflections during the week will be inquiring into questions like, what is real? What's reality? What's real in a human being? What's real in the experiences through our senses? And therefore what's not real in those things.

Because these are kind of fundamental questions, one sometimes, actually I'll say often, in meditating on emptiness has a feeling that the rug is being pulled out from under one to greater or lesser extent. And this is one of the functions of this inquiry, is to see where have we assumed that there's solid ground where there may not be.

So as we start to pull that carpet out, as we collectively all work at pulling that carpet out, sometimes this material can be a little disconcerting, a little unsettling. What we thought was solid ground may not be. So just be aware that that is part and parcel of the investigation, and different feelings will come up about that.

And he said, in Tibet, people are poor, but in the West, people are suffering. And that was the end of that answer.

And I said, well, what do you think Western meditators most need to learn? This was my attempt to get something useful for our community. And he said, through the translator, "Emptiness." And that was the end of that answer.

So when Sally and I decided to do this retreat on emptiness, I thought back to that conversation with Mingyur Rinpoche. He felt that Western meditators particularly needed to understand emptiness. And I think there's wisdom in that assessment.

We in the West can be very solid about our sense of self, very solid about our opinions, very solid about our positions. We can get quite rigid in our thinking patterns and our emotional patterns. And the understanding of emptiness is particularly liberating for minds that tend toward solidity and rigidity.

It's a wonderful antidote to the kind of psychological and spiritual materialism that can creep into our practice—where we start to think that we're accumulating something, that we're getting somewhere, that we're becoming someone special through our meditation practice.

Emptiness cuts through all of that. It shows us that there's nothing to accumulate, nowhere to get to, no one to become. And paradoxically, this understanding can be profoundly liberating and joyful.

But as I mentioned, it can also be unsettling. So as we go through this week together, please be gentle with yourselves. Go slowly. Take breaks when you need them. Talk to the teachers if things feel too intense or if you're getting confused.

Remember that the point of all this is not to become a philosophical expert on emptiness. The point is to taste the freedom that comes from seeing through our solid sense of things. To experience directly what the Buddha was pointing to when he spoke of the liberation that comes from understanding the true

nature of reality.

And that liberation is available to each of us, right here, right now, in this very moment.

He said, yes. End of that answer.

With the language barrier and everything, we weren't getting much conversation going. So we were walking around this path that's about eight feet wide around the top of Mount Tam, and I thought I'd try a different approach because I wanted to get to know him a little bit.

I said, "Can you tell me what's the difference between these two schools in Tibetan Buddhism—the school founded by Nagarjuna called the Madhyamaka, and the school of Dzogchen, which is a meditative school in the Nyingma tradition? What's the difference between the Dzogchen view and the Madhyamaka view?"

His eyes lit up. He said, "The first thing you have to understand is there are eighteen different kinds of emptiness, and I want to tell you about them."

So he sat us down right there on the path. All five of us sat in a circle—Mingyur Rinpoche, the translator, Sally, Mary Ann, and I. And he started going through the different kinds of emptiness and how that affected the view of the Madhyamaka and the view of Dzogchen.

So this topic can proliferate into a lot of talking and thinking, but we want to keep bringing it back to our actual experience. That will be our focus. While we're aware of the rich philosophical implications, keep bringing it back to how we feel it here and now. So don't worry too much about all the complexity that's available. We want to try to keep it relatively simple.

But because there is a lot of complexity, all of us will have our own perspectives on it. One of the things I look forward to is hearing what my colleagues are going to say, because I don't really know. We haven't talked about a lot of this beforehand. So you may hear one of us say things that the other person contradicts in the next dharma talk. I don't know.

We certainly have, as we've discussed a little bit going in, somewhat different angles on it. And we've selected the topics for our talks that reflect our personal interests. So I hope that will make it alive for you as well. But we have different views on how we understand it, how we apply it, how we meditate with it, and how we'll talk about it. So don't worry if there are some contradictions. There are grounds for differing views on this topic. But on the central views, I think you'll see that we all agree.

Just briefly, I wanted to say—and we'll talk about this more as we go—that as we uncover this hidden secret about the world, it doesn't deny the conventional way that we understand the world. The understanding of emptiness, the insight into emptiness, doesn't negate conventional truths.

I'll give you an example of how this can be misapplied. There's a wonderful quotation on the front page of the study guide taken from a basic Nagarjuna text: "Like a snake poorly grasped or knowledge

inappropriately applied, emptiness viewed wrongly destroys a dim-witted person."

So it's easy to take hold of emptiness as a view and lose touch with another level of reality. I'll give you an example. I was watching television the other night, and someone was interviewing a politician who favors extending the tax cuts for the wealthy. You know, this is a topic that's really up in Congress and the administration these days. The interviewer, the journalist—I think it was CNN—asked the politician, "Well, why do you favor extending the tax cuts for the wealthy? Do they really need the money? Do the rich need the money?"

And the politician answered, "There's no rich, there's no poor. We're all interconnected," and he made this gesture. And I thought, that's applying emptiness wrongly. To negate the concepts of rich and poor blocks one's compassion, because on another level, there are rich and poor. And they're suffering because of the poverty. And they're suffering because of the richness.

Emptiness, when held wrongly—not seeing the immediate truth of it, but held as a fixed view—can close our hearts. It can have a dampening, reductionist effect on the world, as though we said, you know, normally we say this is a striker. This piece of wood wrapped in cloth is here to strike the bell and make a sound. If we look at it from the point of view of a quantum physicist, we say, "Oh, it's just atoms and molecules—just protons and neutrons bound at the center of the atoms and electrons orbiting at a great distance around them, and mostly it's space." And then we look around and see everything's just atoms and protons and neutrons. So what does it all mean? It doesn't mean anything.

But conventionally speaking, it still works as a striker. So conventionally speaking, there are still rich and poor. Often, it's important—or really helpful—to maintain the view of compassion, to keep unfolding the compassion as a practice within us as we deepen the understanding of emptiness. And that will prevent us from falling into this trap of grasping onto a view and applying it wrongly.

So compassion is a really important part of the understanding of emptiness. And we have one talk during the week on the connection of emptiness and compassion.

So this is basically just setting the frame of what we'll be doing during the week. As you look through the study guide, you can take a look at the kinds of topics that we'll be addressing, some of the material that we'll be studying and reflecting on.

And so now I'd just like to talk in a little more detail about the structure of the days as we go through them together. We will have two talks every day. Both will be preceded by sittings. So the morning sit will be from 8:30 to 9:15. We'll have a little stretch break, and then the morning talk at 9:30 will be an hour and a quarter, including time for questions and discussion. The evening talk—there will be a sitting at 6:45 till 7:15, a little break, and then an hour for a talk from 7:30 to 8:30, also including time for questions. So those will be the two main talking parts of the day.

Then most afternoons—not the first day, so not tomorrow, because we want to use tomorrow as a quiet

day to settle—most afternoons at 4:15, there will be an hour time for discussion, mostly in small groups in the hall together. We'll seed the discussions with some exercises or questions. But it will be really a time for you to explore the meaning of the concepts as you understand them, as you experience them, and to share them with your fellow practitioners. So it's really a time for you to feel the working of sangha and share with one another from your own understanding and experience.

We've been doing a lot of this kind of work through the Dedicated Practitioners Program, which Sally has been running for a number of years now. So it's a style that I know many of you are familiar with and we're quite familiar with too. It makes a good complement for both the silent meditation and the lectures.

The rest of the day will be in silence, combination of sitting and walking. After the afternoon discussion, we'll close with a short sit so that the words can settle before we go into tea.

During the retreat, we will have regular interviews. Everyone will have two meetings, basically, with us. One will be in the form of a small group, and the other will be an individual interview. So those will start on Saturday with two days of group interviews and then two days of individual interviews.

As we go through the days, please do take care with the silence. It's really going to be the part of the retreat that brings the deepening, brings the factor of concentration that will allow the insights to go deep and be more transformative. As you get to know each other, as there's more talking during the day, there's going to be more temptation to speak to one another than on a regular silent retreat. So please take good care with holding the silence. You'll all find it a really valuable support.

Please do bring the study guide into the future talks and discussions. We'll be referring to the quotations and—did everybody bring a pen and some paper? Just want to get a sense. Okay, I think we can cover you all. We had asked that an email be sent to ask you to bring those. It wasn't able to go out in time, so it's our mistake for not getting the word to you, but we'll find ways to gather that.

And just one last word on logistics. Some of the sits are close to work periods, and I think particularly the sit after tea. There may not quite be enough time if you have a job after tea—and this is mostly pot washers and dishwashers—there may not be enough time for you to completely finish your job before the sitting. If you're one of those people who has work, then it's fine to come into that sitting a little late. Don't feel you have to stay outside, finish your work, and then are excluded from the sit. Because of the work period, if you need to come in a little late to the sit right after a meal, then feel free to do that.

Okay, I think that's all I wanted to say as a way of opening the retreat. I'm really happy to be here with all of you, looking forward to getting to know you and exploring this together. So now I'm going to turn it over to Sally who's going to talk for a bit.

So I'd also like to extend my welcome and greetings to all of you. As Guy said, it's nice to come in the hall and see both so many familiar faces, but also people that I don't know that I'm looking forward to getting to know. And I'm particularly happy to be at this retreat, teaching with Guy and Gil. Obviously more than

good friends—one more than good friend and one good friend.

I appreciate this opportunity to work with Gil and Guy as a teaching team. Both are extraordinary dharma companions who bring their own unique gifts to our shared exploration.

I've been advocating for retreats like this at Spirit Rock because I believe it's essential to expand our offerings, giving people meaningful opportunities to deepen their practice and explore the full depth and breadth of the Buddha's teachings. This retreat represents an ideal beginning for our series of experienced practitioners' retreats.

Having served as one of the primary teachers in our Dedicated Practitioners Program through three complete cycles now—and knowing many of you have participated in that program—I've witnessed firsthand the transformative power of taking a specific dharma theme and exploring it through both meditation and dialogue. As we prepare to launch our fourth cycle, the interest continues to grow.

What sets these retreats apart is their interactive nature. Unlike our foundational silent retreats, these gatherings invite discussion, inquiry, and the kind of meaningful exchange that deepens understanding. For many of us, myself included, learning happens most effectively through dialogue—through the opportunity to ask questions, receive feedback, and engage in genuine inquiry together. This interactive approach creates a rich forum for authentic dharma investigation.

Even with the comprehensive study guide before you—filled with profound suttas that may initially seem impenetrable—please know that this teaching need not remain mysterious. I want to be clear about my role here: I'm essentially the "every person" on this teaching team. While Gil has formal academic training—didn't you complete graduate studies in Hawaii specifically focused on emptiness? And Guy, as many of you know, has read extensively throughout the suttas—I come to this material as a dedicated practitioner rather than a scholar.

I've read considerably but certainly not comprehensively. More importantly, I don't feel the need to know everything, nor should you. What I do know is that this theme of emptiness is profoundly important and entirely accessible. We can each understand what we need to understand for this teaching to become truly transformative—a gateway to deep awakening, genuine letting go, and authentic liberation.

This is the perspective I'll return to throughout our time together. You need not be a scholar or an advanced adept. The meditation practices we'll explore aren't obscure or esoteric—they're simply our regular meditation, approached through this particular lens. My intention is to present these teachings in ways that make immediate sense, that you can recognize and understand within your own direct experience.

What we're exploring isn't mystical or unknowable. Emptiness is a very accessible, understandable teaching. Naturally, at its heart lies profound depth and transformative potential, but we'll approach it organically, allowing understanding to unfold naturally.

All you need bring is your willingness to show up fully, maintaining an open mind and heart, staying present to what's happening right now. Everything else will emerge from this foundation. I'm genuinely looking forward to this week of shared exploration.

Thank you.

I'm certainly delighted to be here as well, and I suppose I'm the one who's filled with emptiness! Reflecting on this theme today, I'm reminded that a blank canvas offers infinite creative possibilities—you can paint virtually anything upon it.

In Buddhism, the concept of emptiness functions similarly. The word "emptiness" itself has been used not as describing a completely vacant canvas, but rather as pointing to something empty of any fixed, inherent meaning—which is, ironically, quite an "empty" thing to say about emptiness itself.

There are so many varied interpretations of emptiness down through the centuries and in the modern world. It's almost like a blank canvas onto which people have projected all kinds of interpretations and ideas about this beautiful word. But in thinking about that, I'm struck by how many people have found in the word emptiness something that's been incredibly meaningful for them—something that really touches their hearts, touches their intimate relationship with the world around them, their freedom, their compassion.

That's what I hope for as we explore emptiness together—that this won't be an abstract topic but something that will point us back to something quite beautiful in our hearts and minds, something that some people would call quite sacred, something that will touch you and be meaningful for you as we're here.

I think this is what this hall and Spirit Rock has been built for—for all of us to be able to meet ourselves, meet our lives in their depth, with all their struggles and sufferings and joys and possibilities for liberation. To find something really blossoming beautifully within us so that we can bring that out into our world as gifts to the people around us, to our community and our world. The topic of emptiness is really a beautiful way to hopefully access something that's quite precious and profound.

I want to emphasize that this is meant to be a retreat. I hope that all the talking we'll do—which is more than in usual retreats—doesn't distract you from this fact, or distract you from the possibility of using this time as a way to drop in, to touch into that which is most meaningful for you. To drop into that place where your heart can blossom and grow. My hope is that as you hear these teachings on emptiness, you'll be challenged by them, but challenged in a way that encourages you to come back to yourself, come back to your own direct immediacy of this life here.

In my Zen training, I loved that aspect of various emptiness teachings that pull the rug from underneath

the places I stood. Rather than feeling like I was tumbling or falling and crashing, I felt like I was flying. So I hope that if some rugs are pulled, you grow wings in the process.

We have a beginning of a retreat. We have this formal way of starting, which is chanting the refuge and precepts. It's a way of collecting ourselves and collecting our intention to be here, of all getting on the same page. We create the retreat together. We're the sacred custodians of each other's time here at the retreat. We support each other, we nourish each other, we protect each other, and we offer our practice as a gift to the people we're with.

In that spirit of collectively creating this retreat, we provide the basic support, the basic foundation that allows people to open their hearts, to look at themselves deeply, and to discover enough trust in life that at least here they're willing to look and open to some of the deepest places we can access.

The precept of not intentionally causing harm, not to kill, is very meaningful in a world where people often cause harm. The precept of not taking what is not given is very meaningful in a world where your things are usually not safe if you leave them on the street or leave them someplace. The precept of not engaging in sexual misconduct is very meaningful in a world where there's a tremendous amount of harm caused in the name of sexuality or ideas about sexuality. In a world where there's a lot of deceit, a lot of lying going on, it's phenomenal to come to a place where there's a group of people committed to being honest.

Here, there's more talking than usual because of the afternoon discussions and the question and answer sessions. Part of our understanding of the fourth precept is the idea of noble silence—that there are periods of time here where we're really committed to keeping the container and the stillness and the silence so as to allow something to bubble up and move through us.

In a world where people experience tremendous suffering because of alcohol and drugs, it's a phenomenal gift that we give our world—not just to our retreat, but to the world at large—that this is a place people know is a safe place from drugs and alcohol. It's a refuge and a support. We come here and try to create that container for all of us and for ourselves, to create the conditions of clarity for our minds and hearts so that some of this deep work can happen.

We call on the Buddha, we evoke the Buddha, we evoke the Dharma, we evoke the Sangha. Because we don't do this alone. We do it with the example of the Buddha, the possibility of awakening. We do it with the potential that we all have to have the mind free and awake. We do this together with the support of the practices, the teachings, and the Dharma. We do it with the support of community.

It seems very helpful to evoke and call and remind ourselves that we're doing something that people have been doing for many, many centuries. We're joining a beautiful current and stream of people who have offered the best of themselves in order to let the best of themselves come forth—the best possibilities of freedom, of compassion, of kindness, of goodness in their hearts into this world.

Retreats sometimes can be difficult, and it's good to remember that we're being held, supported by this wide field of goodness that is represented by the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha, and that is nourished by people living an ethical life, living by the precepts.

Since I understand that you're all somewhat seasoned practitioners, I'd like to invite you to chant this together rather than being led. There's the chant sheet so that if you don't know it, you can read along. I'll start and then you can join me.

[The chanting follows]

Thanks, Susie.

We want to finish the evening with a short sitting just to let the words and the energy settle back into silence. You have been sitting for a while already. If you want to just stand in your place and stretch for a few seconds, adjust your posture, please feel free to do so.

And we'll just sit for ten minutes or so, just as I said, to let the energy settle a little.

Thank you for listening.

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