The Emptiness of Phenomena

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 57:13

So far in the retreat, we've talked quite a bit about the emptiness of self—the absence of an enduring or fixed entity within mind and body. We've explored the aspect of not-self, examining how self gets formed and how the sense of self comes into being.

Tonight I want to talk about the emptiness of phenomena. This is the other side of the emptiness of all appearances, a topic that the Mahayanas have claimed as their own for the last two millennia. Over that time, they've been criticizing us poor Theravadans, claiming that we don't have this understanding. They say, "You see, we Mahayanas have both emptiness of self and emptiness of phenomena. But you poor benighted Theravadins, all you have is emptiness of self. So you're only halfway there."

What I want to do tonight is take a key text from the Buddha's discourses that is all about the emptiness of phenomena and refute 2,000 years of mistreatment.

We've been investigating our experiences as human beings this week. Normally, when I look at a human being, I tend to see a person. When I see you all walking, doing your meditation, when I see you come into the hall, I think, "Oh, there's a person."

In the Visuddhimagga, it says that this is not very wise or very educated seeing. They compare this to a skilled butcher carving up a cow who, as he carves the different pieces of meat, keeps saying "cow, cow, cow." But a skilled butcher who knows the carcass very well would instead be saying "sirloin, tenderloin, rump, ribs."

So someone who is skilled in investigating the mind-body process would not just say "person," according to the Visuddhimagga. They would see it in more detail. They would see the components that they've become very familiar with. This is part of what we've been exploring over these days.

I suspect that when the Buddha looked at a person, he saw in one of two ways. The first way is as we read in the Sutta on Totality: "Bhikkhus, attend! I will tell you the totality of life. It is just the eye and sights, the ear and sounds, the nose and smells, the tongue and tastes, the body and sensations, the mind and mind objects. That's all there is." These are the six senses.

When I first read this, I thought it was very interesting that it outlines human experience, but I wondered: when I sit down and practice and become aware, I'm aware of sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, sensation, and mind objects, but I don't usually notice eye, ear, nose, tongue, body as organs, and mind as an organ. Why do you think the Buddha put those in? Why didn't he just say the totality is sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, sensation, and mind objects? Did he miss the point? Was he hallucinating? Is there some

importance to these other six things?

I'd suggest the reason he put them in is to show that sight, sound, and so forth are dependently arisen. They don't exist on their own—only because we have the sense bases as a body, a human being in a body, do we allow that contact and those experiences of the senses to arise. If he had just said there's only sight, sound, and so forth, it would have seemed like those existed independently. Including the sense organs shows the dependent nature of their arising. So I think it's an important piece.

That's one way we train ourselves to look through the six sense bases—both internal (meaning the organs) and external (the phenomena that arise in them).

The other key framework the Buddha used is the one we've been exploring today as Sally has presented it: the five aggregates—form, feeling, perception, formations, and consciousness.

Are these describing two different totalities? Is there one totality described by the six sense bases and another described by the five aggregates? No. They're describing the same totality of experience, just slicing it up differently. If you'd like to go through and make the association of how the six sense bases map onto the five aggregates, that's extra credit—you get a lot of merit for that. It's actually a fun thing to play with, to see how they line up.

I think it was Bhikkhu Bodhi who said that the Buddha tended to use the six sense bases to show how to cut through craving, since our desire and aversion tends to form around sense bases. But he used the five aggregates to cut through wrong view and establish right view. That's what we've been reading all along: "One sees with proper wisdom thus: material form is not myself, feeling is not myself," and so forth. So the aggregates tend to be used when the Buddha is teaching us the right way to understand the world in order to free the mind and heart.

Sally talked a lot about these five aggregates, and you all explored them in your exercise this afternoon.

Perception may be the most underrated faculty that we possess and not often talked about in our teachings. Notice that the very start of the chant we've been doing in the evening, the Heart Sutra, says that Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva, when practicing deeply the Prajnaparamita, perceived that all five aggregates are empty and was released from all suffering.

This quality of perception is associated with insight. When we have an insight, it usually comes because we perceived something new about our situation, about our experience, about the world.

Here's another example where the Buddha uses the word in a powerful way: "When the perception of impermanence is developed and cultivated, it eliminates all sensual lust. It eliminates all lust for existence. It eliminates all ignorance. It eliminates all conceit, 'I am.'" This is powerful. Just the perception of impermanence developed and cultivated again and again leads to full awakening. So this perception is a powerful quality in us.

The other factor I wanted to touch on briefly because it will bear on our discussion tonight is consciousness or vijnana. As Sally explained clearly, it's consciousness that knows all the arisings of our experience.

The way I understand it happening is that when we have an experience like a sound, the sound is material form, the first aggregate. The knowing of it is the fifth aggregate, consciousness, which is mental. These two rise up together in a unified whole so that a human experience of hearing a sound has both components. It has a physical component, which is from the material world—the sound—and it has a mental component, which is the knowing of that sound.

They come up at the same time. They're joined together. I would say that as a human, it's a unitary experience for us. Hearing is just one moment of experience, but we can look at it as having both these aspects. There's a sound, which is physical, and there's the knowing of that sound, which is mental, and that's the activity of consciousness or vijnana.

Just as an example of how these two things can be together: in holding up this little bell, is it round or is it gold? It's both at the same time. You can't really separate them. You can see the two aspects depending on where you focus, but it's both at the same time—both round and gold.

Similarly, with an experience like hearing a sound, it's both things together. You can focus on seeing one or the other. You can focus on the sound or you can focus on the knowing of it. But they're inextricably linked together, arising together.

It's also said that in every moment of experience all five aggregates are present for us. Simple example: when you hear the bell at the end of a sitting, there's the sound, which is of the form aggregate. There's the feeling tone, and that sound at the end of a sitting is usually very pleasant—one of the most pleasant sounds of the day.

There is the perception. You recognize that that's the bell that ends the sitting, the clear recognition and understanding. Then there's usually a mental formation that accompanies. There's a thought: "The sitting is over." And I don't know about you, but so many times I hear that bell and the thought is, "Oh, now I could sit forever." Then there's a sense of great ease because the sitting's ended. Those formations of thought and the ease—that's the mental formation, the fourth aggregate.

And the knowing of all of those is the activity of consciousness. The sound, the feeling tone of being pleasant, the perception of bell, the thought and the emotion—consciousness knows each of those as they unfold.

So why is it liberating to understand our experience in terms of the five aggregates? Basically because we start to see as we investigate: that's all there is. There is only form, feeling, perception, formations, consciousness. Examine as we might, there's nothing else there.

And so what's missing? The "I" that we normally think is at the center of all this, that experiences each of the aggregates, that owns them, that sees them.

But as we examine our experience closely, there's nothing else in the mix. The sense of I arises from a certain stickiness among all the aggregates coming together so rapidly. We don't see them apart, and they happen so quickly that it feels like an I is created by all that coming together. But when we look closely with refined mindfulness supported by concentration, there's nothing else there. There are only the aggregates.

I'd like to turn to the quotation on page eleven, number thirty-five under the heading "Emptiness of Phenomena." This is from a sutta in the Connected Discourses called "A Lump of Foam."

"On one occasion the Blessed One was dwelling at Ayodhya on the bank of the river Ganges. There the Blessed One addressed the bhikkhus thus: 'Bhikkhus, suppose that this river Ganges was carrying along a great lump of foam. A person with good sight would inspect it, ponder it, and carefully investigate it, and it would appear to them to be void, hollow, insubstantial. For what substance could there be in a lump of foam? So too, bhikkhus, whatever kind of form there is—past, future, present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near—a bhikkhu inspects it, ponders it, and carefully investigates it, and it would appear to them to be void, hollow, insubstantial. For what substance could there be in form?'"

Given that one of the key uses of the word "form" is this body, basically the Buddha is saying here that our body is void, hollow, and insubstantial like a lump of foam—and similarly for the external world. This is not our normal understanding of these things. So in what way could we say that a body is like a lump of foam?

A few years ago, I was teaching a retreat here—I think it was a February retreat—and giving a dharma talk at this same time of day. From outside, there came this kind of wrenching sound. It was a plaintive, tearing, heart-wrenching sound that happened in the middle of the dharma talk. I mentioned it but kept going and completed the talk. Afterwards, I went out of the hall toward the source where we'd heard the sound, and there was a young deer dead not far from the council house.

A couple of staff people had also come out to check, and they said they'd seen a couple of large dogs running away around the time that the deer was killed. It looked like the dogs had attacked the deer and broken its neck because its neck was bent back at a very unnatural angle. A bunch of us gathered around the deer and did loving-kindness for it, wished its spirit well on the journey, and held it as best we could. The caretakers who live on the land said they would arrange for the SPCA to come take it away.

The next morning, the body of the deer was taken down near the front of the property, near the parking lot where you all left your cars, and was left by the side of the road, hoping that the SPCA would come and pick it up. But they never did. So over the next few days, we got to watch what happened to the body of

that young deer.

Every day, a little more of the body just disappeared. Some of it was decay, but for the most part, it was being eaten by other animals that were around and coming by and finding it. After a few days, all that was left of that deer was pretty much the hide, the hooves, the skull. All the bones had been picked clean. Some of them had been carried away. There was very little left. We were able to observe that process day by day.

That brought home to me that this body, too, is like a mass of foam. It can be here very substantially today and in a very short period of time just be gone—disappeared, decomposed, turned into other elements, turned into nutrients, gone into the earth, gone into other beings. It can vanish like that.

The words that Bhikkhu Bodhi translated as "void and hollow and insubstantial"—interestingly, the word śūnya or "empty" doesn't appear in this sutta. But I asked Bhikkhu Bodhi about these words. The word being used for "void" is the Pali word rittaka, which means "devoid of." The word being used for "hollow" is the Pali word tuccha, which literally means "hollow." The Buddha often used this word to describe or scold a monk who didn't really have much substance, who misspoke the Dhamma. The Buddha would call such a monk a tuccha purisa, a hollow man, not a person of substance.

Bhikkhu Bodhi said these two words, rittaka and tuccha, are synonyms for śūnya, synonyms for "empty." So even though the word śūnya isn't used here, the meaning is clearly the same. It could have been used here if the Buddha had wanted to.

Further on in this sutta—I wish I'd put it in the handout; I'm sorry I omitted it, and I can't understand how I left this out because this is a very interesting passage too—the Buddha compares the aggregates to a magic show. This passage goes like this:

"Suppose, bhikkhus, that a magician would display a magical illusion at a crossroads. A person with good sight would inspect it, ponder it, and carefully investigate it, and it would appear to them to be void, hollow, insubstantial. For what substance could there be in a magical illusion?"

In this continuation of the teaching, the Buddha takes us through each aggregate, asking what substance could there be in form, feeling, perception, formations, and consciousness? It's like a magic show, he tells us, and he beautifully summarizes this understanding with a poem that appears in our handout:

Form is like a lump of foam,
Feeling like a water bubble,
Perception is like a mirage,
Volitions like a plantain trunk,
And consciousness like an illusion.
So explained the kinsman of the sun.

"Kinsman of the Sun" is simply another name for the Buddha. But let me clarify one analogy that might not be immediately clear—the plantain trunk. A plantain is a type of banana tree, and if you've ever observed a banana tree, you'll notice something remarkable: it only grows once. After the fruit ripens and is harvested, the trunk decays and falls over because it lacks a solid core. The banana trunk grows up just once, and without that solid foundation, it inevitably collapses. A new one must grow for any more fruit to develop. It's a perfect symbol of hollowness, of emptiness.

So all five aggregates are compared to these profoundly insubstantial images: a mass of foam, a water bubble, a mirage, a hollow trunk, and a magical illusion. This is the very nature of our human experience.

What's the point of comparing our experience to a magic show? Well, magic is truly amazing when you don't understand how it's constructed. Have you ever watched a magician and been completely in awe of what they could accomplish? I have, and it's mind-boggling.

I was reading about Harry Houdini, the great magician from about a century ago. Houdini would perform this incredible trick repeatedly: people would tie him up with ropes and chains, binding his entire body with his hands secured behind his back. Then they would lock those chains with a padlock, place him in a wooden box like a coffin, and nail it shut. Finally, they would toss that box into a cold river where it would sink.

Houdini's feat was to free himself and surface without drowning. When he performed this escape, it seemed like pure magic because spectators witnessed every step—they saw him being tied, locked, nailed into the box, and thrown into the frigid river water.

But was it really magic? According to his own accounts, he had ingenious solutions for each form of confinement. First, the rope binding his hands was deliberately not tied tightly, allowing him to free his hands. For the locks securing the chains around his body, he concealed tiny wrenches in his mouth. Once his hands were free, he could retrieve these tools and, even in the darkness underwater, pick the locks.

Of course, this required time, so he had trained himself to hold his breath for three minutes, even in the shock of cold European river water. He would undo the chains and ropes, but still remained trapped in the boarded-up box. His final trick: one side was very lightly attached, and he could kick it out before swimming to the surface.

The crowd would gasp, "Wow, it's magic!" It's genuinely impressive, but once you understand the method, it loses some of its mystique, doesn't it? It's still remarkably skillful—I certainly couldn't do it—but you realize it's simply a collection of techniques, not magic at all.

What the Buddha taught about the formation of the aggregates follows this same principle: when we see them clearly as they really are, we become disenchanted. The enchantment of the magic show dissolves because we understand its workings. We comprehend the insubstantial nature of how it's all been assembled.

This is precisely why we investigate. We discover the secret of how this self, this being, has been constructed—how the sense of self gets built, how clinging attaches to various aspects of our experience, how that clinging can be released, how the emptiness of self can manifest in that space of peace and spaciousness.

Becoming disenchanted, the teachings tell us, the mind becomes dispassionate. And becoming dispassionate, the mind becomes liberated.

So this is why we want to see through the magical illusion in this way. Because it takes out the "I" at the center that we hold as a center.

There was one period of time a few years ago when I was on an extended period of retreat at home, and I was reading several different versions of this book by Nagarjuna, the Mula Madhyamaka Karika, which is referenced on the first page of the quotations if you need the title. The whole thesis of the book is emptiness. He unwraps one layer of substance and peels that away. You think you're getting a stand on the next layer of substance, and then he unwraps that and peels that away. Going through the twenty-some chapters of the book, little by little, everything gets taken away.

I was very into this analysis while I was sitting, and I was quite open and focused. And I had a dream about it one night. In the dream, I was standing in front of a full-length mirror, looking at my reflection. I asked the question: "Why is emptiness important?" And the image in the mirror replied: "Because it means that you don't exist."

Of course the body exists. Of course feeling exists. Perception, formations, consciousness. But this "I" that we take to be at the center of it isn't really there in the way we think it is. It means that I don't exist. So the world doesn't contain me as a problem. Again, this is pointing to the absence of "I" in the middle of it.

I want to talk a little more about this form being like a lump of foam, because again, this is hard to understand. One of the beauties of our particular meditation practice is that as we get focused, we start to investigate physical sensations really closely. As you investigate physical sensations closely and your concentration strengthens, what happens to the substance? As you're investigating the sensations in the body, as a retreat goes on, the substance tends to go away, doesn't it? You just feel kind of the momentary flickering nature of a sensation anywhere you turn your attention. You just feel pulsation, vibration, tingling, like little lights pulsing on and off. All you see is the nature of change—nothing fixed or solid in the whole experience of the body through the sense of touch.

When you turn your attention to other aspects of experience, you get a similar sense. Sounds become very fleeting. An airplane might fly by, and you can follow that sound until it's completely gone. But all along the way, you just feel its vibratory, changeable nature, and you feel it fade away until it's gone. Sounds are just momentary, arising and passing.

Tastes and smells are really hard to capture, aren't they? You ever go down and really want to smell the

food, and you can smell it for a while, and then the smell just becomes harder and harder to find, as though it's floated out. Tastes are similar—an explosion of taste with the first bite, and as you chew, chew, chew, it gets thinner and thinner until it goes away.

Many of you report in interviews that as your mindfulness gets stronger, you turn your attention to a thought, and as soon as it's seen, it falls away. A thought collapses as soon as mindful attention is placed on it. This is a more difficult area, but we often hear reports of this too: even emotions that might normally come and be difficult to deal with—a flicker of anxiety or fear or anger—can arise and you see it so clearly that it just dissolves right in that moment. There's no way to sustain any sense of substance around it.

So through our meditation, through clear mindfulness and concentration, we start to see how all these senses are just coming and going, just flashing into existence momentarily and then passing away.

But for me, the experience that was always hardest to get that sense with was sight. When I would look out on the world, it seemed unchanging. If your eyes are open now and you look at this lovely pale yellow wall behind me, it looks pretty constant, doesn't it? If you touch the floor, it feels pretty solid. But sight especially doesn't seem to change. It seems to reveal a real and solid physical world that we are embodied within.

So how can we look into this sense particularly, which is hard to see the insubstantiality in? Science can be a little bit helpful here. Although science generally tends to posit a materialist and—in the nineteenth century—quite solid worldview, modern science has really revealed through quantum physics the space in all matter, the formation of fundamental particles like protons, neutrons, and electrons. There's a lot of space in every atom—more space than matter. That's one way that it suggests the emptiness of what we see.

But another way that is just a little more immediate for me is to think about how light works, how a sight arises. We know from science that for a sight to arise, light from some source has to fall on an object, get reflected off that object, come to our eye, land on the retina, which then transmits an electrical signal along the optic nerve up into a certain region of the brain where it ignites certain neurons. And then something really amazing happens: the consciousness of the sight appears.

What's the connection between neurons firing and consciousness happening? I have no idea, and I don't even know how scientists are going to start to solve that riddle. But for now, you and I know that that's what happens. Somehow, through this chemical interaction in the brain, consciousness reveals a sight.

When we think further, we realize if we go far enough into the earth, we go out the other side and there's only space. So the ground that we take for granted is only resting in the middle of vast space. The earth doesn't have any ground—it's just hanging in the middle of vast emptiness.

This ground is also just held in our consciousness. What we take as ground is merely a sensation of

hardness. It's also held in consciousness, and we realize that consciousness itself doesn't have any ground. What is your consciousness resting on? Nothing. Nothing. Consciousness is just hanging there.

So all the phenomena of the world are simply arising in this consciousness which has no ground. We don't know what's actually out there, but we know that how we experience the world through our sense phenomena is insubstantial—only arising in consciousness.

As I understand it, our world of the senses is what the Buddha considered to be reality. This is the reality that he described and encouraged us to look at. I don't think he ever tried to comment on what kind of reality is out there. He was talking about the reality of the six sense bases and the five aggregates—everything coming through the factor of consciousness, which itself is groundless.

There's another fun way to play with this. If I ask you what color this book is, it's pretty clear, right? Let's say it's primarily blue. So we say the book is blue. But again, because you understand through science how light works, actually what's happening is that the blue is being reflected off the book to your eyes, and that's why we see blue. All the other colors are being absorbed.

So truthfully, wouldn't it be more accurate to say the book is everything but blue? The blue is being lost and bounced back.

So where is this color blue? Is it in the book? Or is it only in your consciousness? I'd say it's only in your consciousness. This color blue is not necessarily found anywhere in the book, but it's arising in our senses, and that arising is real.

So this is the world that we actually inhabit. This is the reality of our human experience. We don't know the real world beyond our senses. The world we inhabit is the world of our senses. It's a representation of reality held in consciousness.

Normally, what human beings do is assume that's the real solid world out there. And they don't take the time to reflect that what's arising is only an appearance in consciousness.

So sometimes the vocabulary is helpful to remember. Instead of talking about objects in the world—objects like this striker or objects like this book or objects like the wall—let's talk about them as appearances. Everything that's in our experience is just an appearance, and it's constructed from some interplay between whatever's there and our sense apparatus.

In this way, this is why the Buddha described consciousness as a magic show. The Tibetans called this whole thing a magical display. It's arising in consciousness moment after moment after moment. And the arisings have their own laws. There are physical laws and chemical laws and biological laws governing all the arisings. It's not chaotic, but it is kind of magical that this world keeps appearing.

It's often compared to a dream when we start to see this insubstantial nature. And it's kind of interesting to reflect—in just a moment of experience in waking life or in a dream, can you tell the difference? Now,

of course, you know it's different when you wake up. Then you know it was a dream.

I remember a dream one Christmas Eve when I was about ten years old. I had a dream that I went downstairs into my basement and the basement of our house had been filled from floor to ceiling with toys. And they were all for me the next morning. And I was so happy. I couldn't believe it. This is like everything I wanted. And I woke up and then I knew it was a dream. It was so disappointing. But I knew it was a dream, so I could let go of it quickly.

But what if we knew this was a kind of a dream? Would we cling as hard as we do? The reason we look into impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, selflessness, is so we don't hold on as tight. Emptiness the same way. As we investigate these empty appearances and see their insubstantial nature, the more clearly that's seen, the less tendency there is to hang on because it's kind of dreamlike.

So there are a lot of similes that are used for this kind of insight. The ones in our text tonight: a lump of foam, a water bubble, a mirage, a hollow trunk, a magic show. You're probably familiar with a list from the Diamond Sutra, one of the Mahayana texts: "Thus shall you think of all this fleeting world, like a star at dawn, a flickering lamp, a bubble in a stream, an echo, a mirage, and a dream."

Which do you like better, Theravada or Mahayana? They're both pretty good, aren't they? And aren't they the same pointing? It's exactly the same pointing in this sutta as in the Diamond Sutra.

Another image that's used a lot is the image of a rainbow. It's a beautiful one because it's so clearly appearing in the sky and yet there's nothing to grasp there. There's actually nothing colored in the sky. It's just the effect of sunlight doing two reflections off of water bubbles—one refraction and reflection off the back of a water bubble, splitting according to the prism-like effect of the water bubble. It looks like there's something there, but there's actually nothing in the sky that's red or orange or yellow, green, blue, indigo, or violet. Just an appearance. It's also compared to a rainbow.

Of what use is this kind of insight? It doesn't solve our human problem immediately, and it takes a long time to incorporate—or you might say to integrate. But just like the Buddha said, if the perception of impermanence is cultivated and developed, it leads to the end of desire, the end of ignorance, the end of the conceit "I am." Similarly, these insights into the emptiness of phenomena—emptiness of appearances—lead in that same direction. But we have to cultivate them. We have to continue to develop them.

There's a wonderful text from the Mahayana tradition from a teacher named Atisha called the seven-point mind training. It's just a series of pith instructions, and one of these instructions is: "In post-meditation, be a child of illusion." What this means is when you're not doing formal meditation practice—when you're not practicing awareness in a serious way—when you're walking around, going to the meal, taking a shower, getting dressed in the morning, in post-meditation, post-formal meditation, be a child of illusion.

The meaning is: remember this insubstantial nature of things. It's not saying that everything is an illusion.

The illusion is if we take them to be solid and real beyond representations from our senses. The illusion would be attributing reality and solidity to those appearances, forgetting that they're constructed by the senses and consciousness.

Seeing this is like an insight into impermanence—it's something we have to develop again and again. It doesn't solve the problem right away. There's a short passage from Leonard Cohen that I like from a song called "The Street": "I know the burden's heavy as you wheel it through the night. The guru says it's empty, but that don't mean it's light."

So you might know yourself that it's empty, but it doesn't immediately make it light. But in the long run, it does. It makes it a much lighter relationship with the whole world—with the body, with external things, with people, with emotions, with birth and death. Everything becomes lighter.

One of my teachers, a Tibetan teacher, put it this way. He said, "Everything that appears has no real existence whatsoever." That's maybe a little strong. But how about: everything that appears has no substantial existence whatsoever? It's all just a momentary flickering, triggered by the senses and brought into consciousness, held in consciousness. Just a momentary flashing into existence.

So how do we actualize this insight in our practice? As both Sally and Gil have said a number of times, we don't need to do anything different than what we're doing. It's the close attention to the details of our experience that reveal this stuff. It reveals the impermanence. It reveals the unsatisfactory nature. It reveals the lack of owner or controller or center of the experience. The closer you bring your attention to it and the more stable that attention is, the more these qualities will just be seen, just be revealed. Emptiness is one of them that shows itself in the same way.

Cultivating the perception of impermanence will help this seeing. Impermanence is kind of like the easiest way in to emptiness and to not-self. It's something that we can always understand, and change is fairly easy to see. So developing this perception of impermanence will start to open these other doors as well.

Emotions are sometimes another of the stickiest points. Even when you can see—oh, I get it, the wall's not solid—fear seems solid. Or anger seems solid. These can be the most impenetrable. It's good to practice when the mindfulness is strong and the emotion is weak. When that combination is there, that's when the mindfulness of an emotion can just make it go poof. And you can see how light and cloud-like it is.

At other times, the mindfulness isn't as strong. The hindrance is thicker. That poof doesn't happen. It's not possible to see the emptiness right then. But just keep practicing and the emotions get thinner. They get more transparent, easier to see through as we go.

So this may have sounded like a kind of cold and rational and maybe even heartless analysis, but it's not meant to be that way, and it's not that way for me.

The time I first became deeply interested in the aggregates was after my older sister died. I have two older

sisters, and one of them passed away about fifteen years ago. She wasn't that old—she was fifty-two. She had been ill for a while, but not seriously ill. She had a chronic ongoing condition, but nothing life-threatening.

One evening, she went into cardiac arrest. The paramedics were called but could not bring her back. She died in the emergency room that same evening. It was a huge shock to all of us—she had three children who were in their late teens and early twenties, a tremendous loss for them and for me too. I had felt really close to her.

I went through what happens with grief: a couple of months of depression and darkness, not wanting to get out of bed in the morning because I didn't see the point. What confounded me about her passing was the suddenness of it, though death is always sudden. We may be preparing in the lead-up to it, but the moment of death is always sudden.

What I couldn't quite understand was how she had been so vital and present and real and herself just a couple of days before—I had talked to her on the phone, and she was healthy for her condition, relatively healthy. Then two days later, she wasn't here anymore. How could that happen? It boggled me. I couldn't figure it out.

The only way I started to make sense of it was to understand myself, and then by extension her, in terms of the five aggregates. Then I saw how this appearance of a being—a substantial, solid character with a personality—I saw how it got put together. And then I saw how it could come to an end.

Since then, it's not like death isn't a mystery to me anymore. I still wonder, where did they go? But the process isn't as boggling as it was before. And this reflection reveals tremendous compassion, because it's our shared human situation. The way these aggregates came together to make up this human being—in the same way, they can fall apart.

I want to read you a passage from a senior students' class some years ago, a group of Spirit Rock students. We were talking about this fact of emptiness of self, emptiness of phenomena, and I asked them to reflect on it at home. This is what one person reported in the next weekly class:

"It's spooky. I would look at everything, like this Japanese lamp that I love, and I'd see that it's just an appearance. Where that took me is that we're all appearances. When I went from an object and saw it's an appearance to a person and saw they're an appearance, it made my hair stand on end. But it's true, and it makes you both more compassionate and more vulnerable. When I look at my friend Mary, I see that she's changing all the time. When you start thinking like this, you have to be more compassionate because we're all in the same boat and we're also fragile."

So emptiness is not meant to take us into a cold vacancy, but really to awaken this heart quality of connection and loving-kindness and compassion. This is clearly in the teachings of our tradition as well.

You probably know the figure of Kuan Yin, who is the female representation of the bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara, whom we've been chanting about. Kuan Yin became the feminized version when the bodhisattva went to China. Kuan Yin is said to be the deity, the enlightened being, who listens to the ten thousand cries of joy and the ten thousand cries of sorrow in the world. She's always listening and always hears when we call on her.

Kuan Yin is a bodhisattva. That means she's not a beginning meditator. So Kuan Yin understands that there's suffering, but she also understands there's no "I" at the center of the suffering. Suffering arises when we try to hold on to what's changing, which is why one meditator described it as rope burn. Suffering is rope burn, but there's no one holding the rope.

She understands there's suffering, but no "I" who's doing the suffering. So her smile—her half-smile—is this beautiful balance of wisdom and equanimity, compassion and equanimity. Through seeing emptiness, the heart becomes less burdened, less caught. But out of this opening, the fact that our heart isn't burdened, come loving-kindness and compassion. That's Kuan Yin looking on the world with its joys and sorrows.

This quotation has been attributed to Kuan Yin in the myth of her being: "The winds of circumstance blow across emptiness."

Whom can they harm?

The winds of circumstance blow across emptiness. Whom can they harm?

So let's just sit for a minute, please.

So we have time for walking and then we'll have the last sitting a day with chanting.

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