# The Emptiness of Phenomena

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 57:06

The subject of the talk tonight is the emptiness of phenomena. So far in the retreat, we've been focusing most of our attention on the emptiness of self, using the five aggregates and the six sense bases to show how through non-clinging, we cease to regenerate the sense of self over and over. This is the way emptiness is mostly used in the Theravada—to be synonymous with anatta, the lack of abiding self at the center of our experience.

For 2000 years, the Mahayanins have been challenging us about this. They've been saying, "You have emptiness of self, but you don't have emptiness of phenomena. You don't really have the whole Dharma. We have the whole Dharma and you're missing half of it."

What I aim to demonstrate tonight is that we have the whole Dharma too. We do have emptiness of phenomena. It's just tucked away in corners and hasn't been focused on as much. But it's here, and I want to explain how we find it in the Theravada and some of its implications—because it has what I consider to be profound implications.

We're going to start looking at our human experience through a couple of different schemas. In the Visuddhimagga, it's said that when an awakened person who has carefully investigated mind and body looks at a person, they don't say "person." Rather, they see in more refined terms. When the Buddha looked at a being, I don't think he generally saw a being, a human being, a self, as the first thing.

The Visuddhimagga says that somebody who looks at a person and says "person" is like a skilled butcher who's cutting up the carcass of a cow and as they cut, goes "cow, cow, cow." The skilled butcher wouldn't do that. They would be cutting and saying "rump, sirloin, tenderloin, ribs." Similarly, someone who has looked closely at this mind-body process wouldn't see generic person.

When the Buddha looked, he saw in one of two ways, which we've been discussing. One is the six sense bases, as pointed to in the Sutta on Totality. Remember that? "I'll teach you the totality of life. It's the eye and sights, the ear and sounds, and so forth." The other way is the five aggregates, which Sally explained in many different forms today. Both these ways see the human being in a more detailed manner that brings an element of deeper understanding and less tendency to cling.

This became important for me almost twenty years ago when my older sister died. My sister was only fifty-two at the time. She was a few years older than me, and her death came completely unexpectedly. She'd had a chronic condition, but it wasn't immediately life-threatening. But one day she succumbed and went into cardiac arrest, and the technicians couldn't bring her back. So it was a shock for all of us.

She was someone to whom I was quite close. In addition to the waves of grief that I went through, I felt a darkness for a couple of months in my life—waves of more sadness, less sadness going on day by day during that time. I was able to move through that. But her death really perplexed me.

I had spoken to her just a few days before she died. She was somebody with a big personality, a big heart, a big sense of humor, very caring, very personal, a warm, affectionate kind of person. She had been so full of life and so alive and seemingly so solid the week before, and then she was just gone. I'm sure you all know this experience. It's just so perplexing. What happened to that solid, energetic, loving, caring being that was my sister?

The reflection that helped me most figure out what happens in death, what is involved in the transition from a living being to a dead person, was the five aggregates. In tonight's talk, I hope to touch on some of the insights that helped me understand that better. When I came to a greater understanding of what a person is and therefore what dying means, it was easier to let go and understand the naturalness of this process.

I say this to emphasize that this is not just an idle intellectual pursuit we're engaged in when looking at these teachings of the Buddha. These are really bearing on questions of life and death and the deep meaning of our relationships and our own existence. It's been very relevant and very helpful for me, and I hope it may be for you also.

We've been through a lot today—form, feeling, perceptions, formations, and consciousness. I just want to touch on two very briefly to bring out a little more. We've spent a lot of time in other retreats on form, feeling, and formations. So I want to say one more thing about perception.

Perception is a powerful and underrated factor in our experience, and I believe that putting more emphasis and investigation in this area will prove very rewarding. It plays a particularly significant role in developing insight. In insight meditation, the factor of perception is crucial because insight basically means—well, let me ask you: does insight mean you see something new, or does it mean you see something old in a new way?

It could be both, but very often it's the latter. You're sitting in meditation and suddenly you see things in a way where there's no clinging and you don't make a self around it. You're seeing the same sensations and thoughts, but you're not constructing a self around them.

One quotation from the Buddha points to this importance of perception in the shift we need. He said that when the perception of impermanence is developed and cultivated, it eliminates all sensual lust, eliminates all lust for existence, eliminates all ignorance, and uproots all conceit of "I am." Notice what he's saying—the perception of impermanence. This is the area for insight, something we can turn the mind to and perceive to some degree by investigating, cultivating, and inclining the mind. We can perceive impermanence more frequently than we do, and that perception, when we develop and cultivate

it, leads to all these kinds of freedom.

The second aspect I want to explore further is consciousness, which is central to tonight's theme and has been discussed today as well. As Sally mentioned, consciousness is the knowing quality taking place with any of our sense experience. It's the bare factor of knowing sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, thoughts, and emotions. Human beings have consciousness, dogs have consciousness—all sentient beings have consciousness. It's what enables them to relate to their environment and learn how to survive.

The interesting point I want to bring out is that sense experience and the knowing of it arise together. They're not two separate things. You won't find consciousness beforehand and then a sense experience that you see them meet—they come up completely together. For instance, when there's an in-breath, there's a sensation of rising in the abdomen and falling in the abdomen. You feel that. Feeling that is another way of saying you know that, another way of saying there's consciousness of that. If there were a corpse, you could press on that abdomen in and out, and the physical experience would be happening in that body, but there would be no knowing of it. The knowing is right there with the experience.

In other words, our human experience always consists of knowing sense contact. If you go to sleep, then you don't know sense contact for a while, and consciousness isn't active. So the two are always coming up together. Human experience is sense contact and the knowing of it—there's nothing else going on.

Let me offer another context. The domain of Buddhism is human experience—our human experience. The domain of physics is the interaction between objects and studies of mass and movement of physical objects. The domain of chemistry is the interaction among atoms and molecules. The domain of biology is the study of living organisms. The domain of Buddhism is human experience. The Buddha was not very interested in anything apart from human experience because it's here that there's suffering and the end of suffering. Our human experience is always about knowing sense data—there's nothing else going on.

This is the point I want to clarify. We have here a couple of bells, and I want to use them to illustrate that knowing and the experience—the sense data—are together. But we can look at one aspect or the other. They're not separate things, but we can choose to focus either on the sense object or on the knowing of it. But it's one experience. That's the important thing—there's only one experience, but it has two aspects.

Okay. This bell that you just heard briefly—is it gold or is it round? It's just one bell. It's gold and round, and you can tune into one side or the other of that unity.

So with an in-breath, a sound, an emotion—there's the object and the knowing of it fused as one experience. That's what human experience is: this fusion. We're conscious, we're knowing it. A corpse may have an experience, but the knowing isn't there. So our whole human experience is this union of knowing and objects, knowing and objects. And we can tune in to one side or the other.

Mostly in our meditation instructions in this lineage, we've been giving the instruction: when you're with the breath, feel the sensations. But as Sally indicated today, we could also say, tune into the knowing side

of that. That's the consciousness piece. You can learn to tune into consciousness in that way.

So consciousness is subtle, but it's not unknowable. It's not unfindable. We'll get into that. It's not quite graspable, but you can feel it working. You can feel it happening.

Okay, five aggregates: form, feeling, perception, formations, consciousness. Why is this so liberating? Because there's one central element missing.

Now, back up a second. Form, feeling, perception, formations, consciousness. Can everything in your experience be fit into one of these categories? In other words, is this an exhaustive description of human experience? Can everything fit in one of these categories?

What about the unconscious? I would say the unconscious is not a reality until it makes itself felt in the conscious. The unconscious is a concept developed by Western psychology, but it can mean one of two things. It could mean something that's active but is too subtle for us to pick up and recognize. The word that Buddhism uses for that is delusion.

For example, I decide to give a gift to somebody, but really what I'm interested in is getting the recognition from them. But I'm unaware of that motivation. That motivation is at work, but we would call it unconscious because I'm not aware that that's happening. So an unconscious motivation is: I want recognition. That distorts the act of giving. And it may come across really weird to the person because I keep hanging on and going, "Did you like that gift? Did I get you what you wanted for your birthday? Was that like the coolest birthday gift you got this year?" That's an unconscious motivation, but if we were more attentive, we would recognize it.

So I will say that from my point of view—Buddha's point of view—the unconscious is not real until it expresses itself in consciousness in some way.

Then the Buddha also talked about things he called latent tendencies. So we have latent tendencies such as desire and becoming and ignorance that aren't apparent because they aren't active right now. We can recognize that those things may be there somewhere, but they're not significant until they act, until they're brought into consciousness. And when they come, latent tendencies are in the fourth aggregate of sankharas. They're one form of mental formation.

The five sense objects all go in the first category of rupa. Sight, sound, smell, taste, touch are all in the category rupa. And then thoughts and emotions are in the category sankhara—the fourth. Actions really go in the fourth aggregate as well, volitional formations.

It does include actions of body, speech, and mind. So everything in human experience can be accommodated within these five aggregates. This is important. If you don't think it through tonight, think it through later. This is an important question.

Alice pointed out that Nibbana is outside this list. Most of us are not experiencing Nirvana, clearly. So it is

the one thing that is outside this list. But generally, let's say sense experience—all the elements of our normal waking experience—can be fit into one of these categories. So for now we'll say it's an exhaustive list. Everything can be fit in there.

So there's one big element that's not named there. Form, feeling, perception, volitions, consciousness. Where's the I? There isn't any. This describes human experience exhaustively and it doesn't require an I or a self to do that. So that's why it's liberating to see in this way.

When we see our experience as the five aggregates or as the six sense bases, we see it without this overlay of self. And I believe that's how the Buddha saw. So when we start to see this way, we're starting to see the way the Buddha saw. We're training ourselves to see without ego, to see the world of human experience without ego. That's the significance of it.

So this is kind of freeing. There was one point in my practice when I was doing a home retreat and studying this book by Nagarjuna called The Root Verses on the Middle Way. There are a few quotes from it in the study guide. It's a treatise on emptiness. He just keeps looking at every form of existence that one could solidify, and then he shows the emptiness in that. I'd been really plunged into this in the middle of a period of retreat time.

One night while I was sleeping, I had this dream. I was standing in front of a full-length mirror and the me that was standing in front of the mirror asked the question, "Why is emptiness important?" The person in the mirror answered, "Because it means you don't exist."

That's the significance of emptiness. It means that we don't exist as an object, as a center of things, as a problem. There are these processes of nature that are going on. There's no owner, and they don't constitute an enduring entity. And when we can see in this way, it takes some of the burden out.

You may know this story. Jack Kornfield, after he had been a monk in Thailand, was visiting this old monk in Sri Lanka. The old monk knew that Jack had done some Dharma practice in Thailand, and he said, "Oh, so you've been practicing Buddhism for a while. Tell me, what's the essence of the Buddhist teachings?"

Jack said, "Well, the essence, as I understand it, is that there's no abiding self at the center of this human experience."

And the old monk said, "That's it. No self. No self, no problem." And he just laughed. No self, no problem.

And that is the meaning of it. That's the importance of it. When we take the self out, it takes out some of the problem.

This also leads into emptiness of phenomena. They're connected. I was talking to one of my teachers once and saying, "Should I look on the side of emptiness of self or look on the side of emptiness of phenomena?"

He said, "There's only one emptiness."

So we're going to explore this manifestation—the emptiness of phenomena. Let's look at page eleven, quote number thirty-five. This is called the Sutta on a Lump of Foam from the Connected Discourses.

It says: "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, whether past, future, or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near—a person 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?'"

This is a little shocking, isn't it? Isn't form the most substantial thing you can think of? What is more solid than form? But here the Buddha is saying no, form is exactly like a lump of foam.

In this passage, he doesn't actually use the word śūnya, which means empty, but he uses a couple of words that are synonymous. He uses the term "void"—this term in Pali is rittaka, meaning devoid of, very close to empty. And then the word "hollow"—the Pali word used is tuccha. This was used by the Buddha at one point to scold a monk who lacked substance, calling that person a tuccha purusa, a hollow person, hollow man. So both are synonyms of śūnya, even though that word isn't used here.

So how is form like a mass of foam? I was teaching a retreat at Spirit Rock one year, and at this time of day I was giving a dharma talk when I heard a really eerie shriek from outside. It was like a baby crying or screaming. A couple of staff people went out to see what was happening. I continued with the dharma talk.

When the talk ended, I went out to see what was there. A deer had been killed, lying right over by Upeka, on that little grassy area, and its neck was twisted way back. One of the staff people said that when they had gone out, they had seen a couple of large dogs running away. So apparently the deer had been attacked, and it looked like its neck had been broken. It was dead. By the time we got there, there was nothing we could do.

We formed a circle—some yogis came out—and said some prayers and sent loving-kindness for the deer. The caretakers called the Humane Society, who said they would come and take away the dead deer the next day. So the caretakers moved the deer down near the front of the property, actually near where you all park, and waited for the Humane Society to come pick it up. But they never came. I imagine they had other more pressing things to do.

So the carcass of the deer sat out there. It was very interesting to watch it day by day because it just started disappearing. Other animals came and fed on it—probably vultures and coyotes and raccoons and maybe even bobcats. There were bobcats on the land and other scavengers. Day by day, there was a little

less there, a little less there, until within a week, there was really only the hide and the skull left, and the bones that remained.

I thought: something that was so solid and vital a week before—poof—gone so quickly. So in that way, form is like a mass of foam. It seems substantial, but it can go really quickly.

Then the Buddha continues in this sutta—I haven't put it all in here—but he compares the five aggregates to a magic show. This was an interesting reflection. If you've ever been entranced with magic, a lot of teenage boys go through a fascination with it. I did for a while. I looked into the life of Houdini. Harry Houdini was this great illusionist and escape artist around 1910, and he would do some very impressive tricks.

They would tie up his hands and clasp them behind his back. They would circle him round and round with chains and put padlocks on the chains. Then they would put him in a box, a wooden box, and nail it shut on every side. And then they'd throw it into a river so that he would sink. But every time they did it, a few minutes later, Houdini would swim to the surface. And every time, people couldn't believe that he'd done it again because they'd seen him tied up and bound and padlocked. It was like magic. How did he escape again?

But there were tricks. And when you know the tricks, it's no longer magic. So the tricks were: his hands were tied not very tight. The first thing he did was wiggle his hands free. Then inside his mouth, he had some very small picks and wrenches. He would pull them out when he got his hands free. And then he was an expert lock picker. He could undo the locks that were binding the chains and unwrap the chains. And then one of the sides of the box was nailed very lightly—it was almost false nailing. He could knock that out and then swim to the surface.

But one other skill was needed: he had to hold his breath for three minutes underwater because that's how long it took him to do all this other work in the dark, cold water. So when you put all those skills together, it's quite difficult to do, but it's not magic. It's an impressive display, but it's not magic.

So the Buddha said that's what consciousness does. And then the Buddha goes through this whole list of similes:

Form is like a mass of foam.
Feeling is like a water bubble.
Perception is like a mirage.
Volitions are like a plantain trunk.
And consciousness is like a magic show.

The plantain trunk we might have to explain. The banana tree—plantain is a form of banana—does not have a solid core. If you ever look at one, it's just green leafy stalks overlapping each other, forming enough strength to hold the plant up with the fruit. But when that fruit finishes, the tree basically dies.

There's not a trunk there to continue it. So it's got a hollow core, basically.

And consciousness is like a magic show. So explained the kinsman of the sun.

Let's take a look at this area of consciousness being like a magic show. How is that?

As I mentioned the other night, we live in a culture that puts a lot of emphasis on the material. Western culture hasn't very well investigated the mind—not to the depth that Eastern cultures have, either Hinduism or Buddhism or Taoism. In some of those Asian wisdom traditions, matter is not primary; mind is primary. Or you might say consciousness is primary.

What happens if we look from the side of consciousness at our experience? What does that look like?

First of all, in meditation, we start to get a sense of the lightness of sense experience in the senses first. We come into meditation and we feel the body is solid. Do you remember the first time you started to see it's only sensations? It's only changing sensations of pulsation and vibration and pressure and coolness. That there isn't anything solid in the felt experience of the body? That's kind of radical when we discover that.

People who have done retreats with S.N. Goenka usually have experienced that by the end of the retreat. It's just a flow of sensations that make up this thing we call body.

As the mind stills, we start to see how sounds just come out of nowhere and then disappear. Thoughts arise, and if they're seen clearly, they often just go poof. Emotions which seem like such strong motivators—when we can see them clearly, it's hard even to find them. Oh, I know I was feeling that sadness, but where is it? It's just like a cloud.

All these sense impressions become very light. There was that great book by Milan Kundera called The Unbearable Lightness of Being. Our meditation leads us into that kind of relationship.

But there's one of the senses that's hardest, for me anyway, to find the lightness in, and that is sight. When I look at a room, at people, at walls, at floors, it really looks solid. So let's investigate that and see: is sight really as solid as it looks?

Let's use a little bit of our scientific knowledge. We know that the way sight is generated is that light falls on an object in the form of photons, reflects off that object to our eyes. Sight can only arise if light lands on our retinas and then stimulates an impulse through the optic nerve that goes to the brain. Then some kind of processing happens that nobody understands, not even the neuroscientists. And then boom—a sight appears.

So that sight seems to be solid and unchanging, but when you reflect, it's actually being continually refreshed or regenerated by these millions of photons landing on the retina each second. And if that flow of photons stops, the sight disappears. So the sight is not a solid thing at all, but it's being on-off, on-off, on-off, on-off so fast that we normally can't see it. I will say that yogis in deep meditation can see that

flickering nature, but normally we don't. But we can use a little scientific reflection to validate that it is just flickering on-off, on-off, on-off.

So then one starts to wonder: in the Western worldview, we normally take the physical world as the ultimate reality. That's the way we're conditioned to think. This is what's real. And I am born into this physical world called planet Earth. I am trapped here for the duration of my lifespan. When I die, I go away and this physical world, which is the ultimate reality, continues. That's the standpoint from which we understand and look at it.

But I wonder if this physical world is the most fundamental fact, or if perhaps consciousness is equally fundamental. Remember I mentioned that the Buddha said that body and consciousness support each other like two stalks of reeds. So what if consciousness is equally important as this physical world?

In examining this process of seeing, we have to question: are we seeing the real ultimate physical world? Or is light simply landing on our eye, being processed in the brain, and then we're constructing a representation of the world through our senses and brain that's held in consciousness? Can we ever see the real absolute physical world unvarnished, or is it only known through our senses and brain's processing? It's the latter, isn't it?

This physical world that we take as ultimate, absolute, true, unquestioned, is only a construction of our own senses, brain, and consciousness. Who knows what relationship it bears to the physical reality out there. Animals see it differently than we do. We know they don't see in color as one example. They may detect things that we're unable to detect—different spectrums of light. So we've taken this representation that's a floating phantom in consciousness, and we've ascribed to it this ultimate, grounded physical reality that it just doesn't have. All the sense impressions are only appearances in consciousness.

Now, we also tend to think—it's very comfortable to think that there's a ground underneath us. And physically we can feel that. We feel the pull of gravity and the ground feels solid. But what's underneath this ground? If you go to the other side of the earth, it's just empty space. It's just hanging in empty space. Even this physical thing doesn't really have a ground. It's just a relative floor.

But the interesting thing about consciousness is it doesn't have any ground. It doesn't need a ground. What's the floor of your consciousness? It's just a bubble. Consciousness is just a bubble.

One of the things I used to like to play with was color. Color is so amazing, the way it exists. If I hold up this book, I think everybody would probably see that it's blue, right? But then I started to wonder: well, where is blue? Normally we think, oh, blue is here. But again, if you know the laws of physics, you know that the reason it looks blue is because all the other light is being absorbed and only the blue is being reflected back. That's why it looks blue. The blue gets reflected to our eyes and so we see blue.

But actually what's absorbed here is all the other colors of the spectrum. So actually this book is anything but blue—it's everything but blue.

So where is blue? It's only in your consciousness, isn't it? It's not in this physical reality. Blue is only an appearance in consciousness.

Here's another one that particularly interested me. When we go out at night under the sky—on a clearer night than tonight—we can see all these stars, right? The vastness of consciousness becomes really apparent. So, is your consciousness actually reaching out to that star? Or has light from that star traveled all those millions of light years, impinged upon your retina, and then the brain and consciousness created this appearance of vast space? Your consciousness doesn't reach to that star, does it? I'm not saying consciousness is bounded or limited or finite, but I don't think it's reaching out to Alpha Centauri tonight. So again, consciousness creates this sense of space, this vast sense of space.

We don't live in a reality of the physical world. We live in a representation of reality constructed by our senses and our consciousness. And everything that appears is only an appearance in consciousness, which has no ground. This is the sense of the emptiness of phenomena. The physical world does not have the substantiality we attribute to it. It's only an appearance.

One nice way to remind ourselves of this is to change our language. Instead of talking about objects, we can talk about appearances. Everything that we used to call an object, we can start to see as simply an appearance. It's just an appearance in consciousness.

That's why the Tibetans call this whole thing a magical display. They call it a magical display, but they probably don't know that they're taking that image from this old Theravada sutta, where the Buddha compared consciousness to a magic show. But that's where it comes from. Or in the Diamond Sutra: "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." These images are also closely related to this old sutta. Sometimes it's also compared to a rainbow. A rainbow appears, but there's nothing substantial there with those colors.

One of my teachers put it this way: Everything that appears has no real existence whatsoever. No solid existence. Maybe there's something solid out there. But Buddhism is concerned with our human experience. In our human experience, everything that appears has no solid existence whatsoever. Things are only appearances in consciousness. This is the meaning of the emptiness of phenomena. Nothing in our field of experience is solid or grounded. It's all groundless and held in this bubble of consciousness.

There's this wonderful set of teachings in the Mahayana called the Lojong Training or the Seven Point Mind Training, created by a seventh-century teacher named Atisha in India. It's a wonderful set of slogans to study, and I recommend it. But one of them that I really like says, "In post-meditation, be a child of illusion." That means when you're not formally meditating, when you're walking about and experiencing the world with your eyes open, be a child of illusion. Or you could say a student of illusion. Meaning, we often create the illusion that this physical world is solid and the ultimate reality. But it's not. Remind yourself: this is only an appearance in consciousness. Everything we see is only an appearance in consciousness.

This opens the door actually to seeing ourselves in a new way also. And I want to talk a little about that.

When I was a monk in Thailand, one of the great privileges of being a monk is that we were allowed to witness autopsies. So I was thirty-two years old, and I went down to a hospital in the center of Bangkok, very near to the parade ground, if you know that part of the city. A lot of buses coming and going, a lot of people walking through this busy part of Bangkok, and went to a nearby hospital, Siriraj Hospital. And I had never stood next to a dead body in my whole life. I walked into the coroner's office and there was a dead body laid out on a stainless steel table. It was a young woman who had drowned in one of the klongs, one of the canals. And I was able to stand next to her.

I'd been meditating quite a bit in the monastery at that time, and so I was very open and very sensitive, and here I was next to my first dead body. So that was powerful enough.

But then we sat in the operating theater, and she was brought in on a table, and the coroner began to dissect her in carrying out the autopsy. I'll spare you the details, but he took apart basically every part of her abdominal cavity and her brain in order to remove the organs and weigh them. We were able to just sit there and watch that happen. And then he brought out two other bodies. That took about half an hour, the first autopsy. And then he brought out two other bodies and did the same procedure for them. So we got to watch those also.

And then we left and I was with a friend and we headed back to the monastery. I remember walking out onto that parade ground and watching people walk by—couples walking by holding hands, parents with children in strollers, an old woman carrying a shopping bag of groceries over to the bus stop. And everyone I walked by, I saw as a walking corpse. That's a phrase that came to my mind. They're all just walking corpses.

And this wasn't depressing. It was very enlivening.

And then I had to reflect: what's the difference between those who are walking and alive and those bodies I had just been standing next to and watched being disassembled in the coroner's office? What I saw was in the people who were walking, the difference was there was this spark of consciousness that I could see shining out through the eyes. And then there was the body. That was fundamentally what I saw. There was a body, which was just like those corpses, but then there was this spark of consciousness.

But as I reflected on it, that spark of consciousness was totally here and now. No past, no future. Just here and now, awake, alive, taking in the sense input. But there's this peculiar capacity we have called memory. So we can store up these moments of consciousness as vignettes to bring up later. And the bringing up of them over and over gives us a sense of past and future and a continuity through the present. But that was all a mental construction. The reality was there was the body, which was totally of the present moment. There was this brightness of knowing, which was totally of the present moment, and there was nothing else. There was really no past and no future in reality.

That's where I got a sense of where my sister had gone. What ended was only this brightness of consciousness, which was so insubstantial to begin with, so light to begin with. And also seeing in this way, the brightness of consciousness in the body were all the same. This consciousness is not very different. These bodies are not very different. So seeing in this way—this is a situation for all of us. We're just this brightness, but we're deceived by memory into constructing a continuous self enduring through past and future. But there is only this bright awareness.

So seeing in this way can also be a little unsettling. We mentioned this at the beginning of the retreat. There isn't the solid ground that we thought there was. There is only consciousness and the appearances that it holds, none of which are substantial or solid. And we are not very far away from the reality of a corpse. Just that brightness of consciousness and knowing.

That's why the Tibetans say that it's not easy to bear the truth of emptiness. It takes some time sometimes, and it takes some heart to bear the truth of emptiness when it's seen on this level and to this degree. But at the same time, they say emptiness is the womb of compassion, because we see we're all in the same boat.

Some years ago, Sally and I were teaching a class for some senior students of Spirit Rock, and we were going through this material with them. We asked them to reflect and give us feedback on how it felt for them. So a week later, one of the students came back and put it this way. She said, "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 to say it's an appearance to a person to say 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 all so fragile.

For me, being able to see in this way means that I can turn from seeing someone as a personality with a personal history and psychological patterns and past and future and problems and joys and all that, to in a moment seeing them essentially as a body plus consciousness. I recommend that you play with this. Play with it with some of your friends, partners, loved ones. You know them really well. Imagine them as a personality enduring over time and see how that feels. And then turn to see them as essentially what we all are in this moment—body plus consciousness—and see how that feels. I encourage you to play with it. I think it can evoke a lot of compassion.

Kuan Yin is the bodhisattva of compassion in Chinese Mahayana Buddhism. It's said that her special gift is that she hears all the cries of the world, the cries of the ten thousand sorrows. She's listening and hears the difficulties that we all face. So she hears that suffering, and Kuan Yin is not a beginning meditator. Kuan Yin's a bodhisattva and she's a pretty advanced meditator. That means she understands that there's suffering, but there's no "I" at the center of this to whom the suffering is happening.

One meditator described it this way: "Suffering is just rope burn." You get that image? All these things are passing through and we try to hang on and we can't. So Kuan Yin understands that. There is suffering, but there is no "I" at the center that is doing the suffering.

This understanding is a beautiful blend of wisdom and compassion. The wisdom of seeing the emptiness gives the heart ease. It gives the sense of freedom, the understanding that no one is permanently damaged by this process. But the compassion gives the ability to stay open and related and wanting to help in the ways that we can to the situation that all of us face.

So this blend of wisdom and compassion—you'll feel it in statues of Kuan Yin, like the statue at the back, and her posture of royal ease. That's the liberation, but the heartfulness is also there. You see it in the half smile of the Buddha, which is that expression of equanimity, balancing wisdom and compassion.

Through seeing the emptiness, the heart becomes less burdened. And in that unburdening, then we have the capacity to feel the suffering that we meet in life, our own and others. And our heart, because it's not so burdened, can open better with love, compassion, kindness—whatever the situation needs.

I'll close with this quotation that is attributed to Kuan Yin, who's not known to have been a historical being, but who cares: "The winds of circumstance blow across emptiness. Whom can they harm?"

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