Emptiness is Everything

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 1:06:01

Okay, so as I said earlier, it's a real treat to share with you tonight my good friend and respected colleague, Guy Armstrong. I probably teach with Guy and his wife Sally Armstrong and Carol Wilson more than anyone over the last 20 years. We always teach the February retreat together and we've gone through so many things together.

Guy and Sally are probably as important players, besides Jack Kornfield, of Spirit Rock being what Spirit Rock is—especially the construction of both the meditation hall and the new meditation community hall. This is just what he does on the side besides all the teaching, going to countless meetings and having a brilliant flair for creating beautiful things. But he's just a very special combination of clarity, depth of dharma, and good heart. When we teach on the February retreat, I teach about love and compassion. He teaches about dependent origination and karma and rebirth and those things. Thank you, Guy. So it's a real treat to have him here with us to share about this work that he's put the last two years or more into—a beautiful book called *Emptiness*, which I highly recommend. I'm enjoying it very, very much. So take it away.

Thank you, James. And it's a pleasure, it is a pleasure to be here. James and I have spent so much time together over the last 20 years in teaching and in meetings. I was sort of estimating the other day—I think all told we've probably spent about two years of our life working together. So he is a real dharma brother and a great friend. And coming into his community just feels like coming into family. So I'm happy to be with you all tonight.

I would like to talk about this topic of emptiness, which is not the simplest topic in the world to talk about. I usually teach this theme in a seven-day retreat. There are a lot of pieces to it. So this evening, I just want to hit a few of the highlights and leave you with maybe a little bit to reflect on, a little bit of food for thought. I hope that will interest you.

One thing to say about this word is it's not the most appealing for the central concept of a world religion. You know, the Hindus have bliss and devotion, the Christians have love and charity, and the Buddhists have emptiness. It's not much of a hook. But it has been really central to all the schools of Buddhism for the last 2,500 years—starting with the original teachings of the Buddha and the centuries of early Buddhism, the early Mahayana which expressed itself through the Prajnaparamita Sutras and the teachings of Nagarjuna, the later evolution in East Asia. As we sit in this temple, I feel like the emptiness vibe is just kind of permeating from the devotion and the philosophies that informed Chinese Buddhism, and then it translated to Japan as well. So this has been a theme, and I would say the central thread that

links all the different traditions of Buddhism, the major schools over the last 2,500 years. But there are a lot of pieces to it, so we'll just touch on a few tonight.

Just to kind of illustrate the range of it, there's a young Tibetan lama named Mingyur Rinpoche. He's a wonderful teacher and a terrific practitioner. He visited Marin for the first time about 20 years ago—I've forgotten whether it was 97 or 98. And I had a little bit of connection to him through knowing his brother, Tsoknyi Rinpoche. So I got to meet him on his visit to California.

Living in Marin, I thought, well, let's take him for a little bit of a sightseeing tour. Maybe he'd like to see the top of Mount Tam. So we drove up to the top of Mount Tam. And on the way, I was trying to make conversation. I said, "Rinpoche, how do you find the West?" He said, "Square and clean." End of conversation.

Okay. I better try again. "Rinpoche, do you think Tibetans are happier than Westerners?" "Yes." End of dialogue.

So we got up to the top of Mount Tam, and if you've ever been up there, you know that there's an asphalt path that goes around the peak. Beautiful 360-degree views of the whole Bay Area and the ocean. So we were walking around on that path, and I just thought, I better try one more time.

So we got up to the top of Mount Tam, and if you've ever been up there, you know that there's an asphalt path that goes around the peak. Beautiful 360-degree views of the whole Bay Area and the ocean. So we were walking around on that path, and I thought I better try one more time to talk to this esteemed Lama.

So I said, "What's the difference between the views of the Dzogchen school and the Madhyamaka school of Tibetan Buddhism?" Two central schools within that lineage. Then he got interested. "Ah," he said, perking up as his eyes lit up. He said, "The first thing you have to understand is there are 18 different kinds of emptiness."

And then he sat right down on the path. It was only six feet wide. He sat down, so we all had to sit down. We totally blocked the path going around. And he talked for about ten minutes about the 18 kinds of emptiness in these two schools of Tibetan Buddhism.

So this is a subject for tremendous reflection. If you look on Amazon, you can probably find hundreds of books on this topic—well thought of in the Buddhist world, reflected on extensively, written about prolifically. I'd like to share just some key points this evening.

The main pointing behind this concept is that the world is not as solid or as substantial as we take it to be. That's a summary of the message of emptiness. And there are two key points I'd like to pull out of this.

One is that there's something we haven't quite understood about the way the world is. There's a very famous text among the Prajnaparamita body of texts called the Heart Sutra. You've probably heard of it. Many of you may have recited it. And it begins describing the practice of a bodhisattva named

Avalokiteshvara. Avalokiteshvara is an Indian being who is the embodiment of compassion. And when this image of Avalokiteshvara migrated to China, it transformed into Kuan Yin, the female principle of compassion. And I'm sure there's one at the back, for sure, who's facing the front. The white statue at the back is of Kuan Yin—a beautiful devotional figure. Avalokiteshvara is the male representation from India.

And the very start of the Heart Sutra says, "The Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara, when practicing deeply the quality of wisdom, perceived that mind and body are empty and was saved from all suffering and distress."

So within the tradition, that's the liberating power of this kind of insight. It is meant to save us from suffering and distress.

The kind of meditation that James and I teach is called insight meditation. The Pali word for it, the old Indian word, is vipassana. And the purpose of it is so that we gain more understanding, more insight into the way things are. Vipassana literally means to see clearly—to see clearly how things are.

So our development of insight meditation is meant to bring us to the same understanding that Avalokiteshvara had. And the purpose of that is to liberate us. This is not just a philosophical exercise or an intellectual exercise, but it's meant to free our hearts and minds. It's meant to lead us away from unhappiness, from stress, from worry, from anxiety, and into a great degree of freedom and happiness.

So that's the purpose behind all these teachings, and I hope we keep that view on it as I talk this evening.

One thing to clear up in the beginning: emptiness does not mean in the Buddhist lineage what it sometimes might mean in the West. It doesn't mean a vacancy, a total absence, nothingness, despair, cynicism, hopelessness. That's not the intention. It is rather to open up this spaciousness where we feel the fullness of life coming into the empty space. So we'll talk about that more as we go.

Now you probably know that in Buddhism there's tremendous emphasis given to the understanding of impermanence. We look into the fact that everything is always changing on every level—the personal momentary level, the level of one lifetime, the level of the cosmos and the planets and the sun. Everything eventually comes and goes.

And there's a reason that we look into that so deeply in Buddhism. It's so that we don't hang on so tightly to things that are bound to change. Because if we're hanging on to something and it changes, we're going to suffer from that.

So emptiness takes this principle one step further. And the seeing of emptiness is that there was nothing there to hang on to in the first place. We'll talk about this more. But we see the insubstantial nature of the way the world actually is. We see there's not a thing there that we can ever hang on to.

This also helps us to let go and keeps us from suffering. When we understand the insubstantial nature of all phenomena, we're less likely to grasp onto things that will inevitably slip through our fingers.

We're going to explore two or three ways that emptiness reveals itself in our meditation and investigation. The first is emptiness of self—the recognition that there's no solid core at the center of this mind-body process. This is the teaching known in our lineage as anatta or not-self, a central teaching of the Buddha.

The second is the emptiness of phenomena, which doesn't mean that the things we perceive don't exist, but rather that they're not solid in the way we typically imagine them to be. Suzuki Roshi captures this beautifully when he says, "Of course the bird we see and hear exists, but what I mean by that may not be quite what you mean by that." We want to learn to see the bird the way Suzuki Roshi sees it, because that understanding will keep us from suffering.

Let's begin with the teaching on the emptiness of self. The Indian teacher Nisargadatta Maharaj, who taught in the Advaita Vedanta tradition, said, "The aim of all the yogas"—and here yoga means any path that leads to liberation—"is to free you from the calamity of separate existence." This is meant to be a provocative statement. Why would separate existence be a calamity?

Because once we feel separate from everything else that is, it creates in our minds a sense of duality—self and other. And once we have a self, there's something that must be defended, protected, nourished, something constantly under threat from what is perceived as other. This idea that we are completely separate leads to a sense of isolation, of not belonging, of insecurity and underlying anxiety.

I think this is one of the most challenging aspects of contemporary Western life, as the sense of community continues to break down in so many societies. People are losing connections to family, neighbors, and close friends whom they might see daily. This leaves individuals feeling alone, isolated, and somewhat fearful.

As we investigate the emptiness of self, some of those boundaries we've created can start to weaken and eventually fade away, at least temporarily. In the Buddha's lifetime, he had a cousin and attendant named Ananda—the name means bliss. Ananda appears as one of the sweetest figures in the early teachings, a very kind and caring person. But he was younger and often found himself a step behind the other practitioners in understanding.

There's a text where Ananda approaches the Buddha and says, "Sir, you're always saying that the world is empty, but what do you mean by that?" The Buddha responds, "The world is empty because it's empty of a self or what belongs to a self."

This is both interesting and counterintuitive. Does it feel like your world is empty of a self right now? Probably not. Most of us experience the self as present most of the time. But the Buddha is suggesting that perhaps there's something here worth investigating more deeply. Maybe we don't fully understand what we carry as our idea of a self.

Let me ask you a couple of simple questions. First: How old are you? You don't need to answer aloud—that might be embarrassing for many of us. But it's a straightforward question, right? If you say, "I'm 39 years

old," what do you really mean by that? Are your thoughts 39 years old? Is your mood 39 years old? What exactly is 39 years old? The body, right? So we're really saying the body is 39 years old. Here we're equating "I" with the body—they're the same thing.

But what if I ask, "What color are your eyes?" Again, an easy question. You might say, "My eyes are brown." But here, you're not saying "I am brown." You're not identifying yourself as the eyes that are brown, but rather presenting yourself as someone who has eyes. Now you're the owner of the body. They're your eyes; you might speak of your body.

So which is it—are you the body, or do you have a body?

Or are you something separate from it that owns it? And can you be both? How many selves are you in any given moment?

Then we can do the same question with emotions. We might say, "I'm happy" or "I'm sad." So here we're equating ourselves with the emotion, with happiness or sadness. But we could also talk about "my joys" and "my sorrows." So we could be the body, we could be the owner of the body, we could be the emotion, or we could be the owner of the emotion.

Can you be all of them in one moment? It doesn't quite make sense, does it? Usually people who feel they're more than one self are offered medication. So you might not want to go around telling people you feel you're four selves at once.

And then there's one other way that we really create this sense of self quite often. And that is maybe the deepest sense—we feel like we're an observer that's located between the ears and behind the eyes, sort of two inches into the center of the head. And it's kind of looking out, seeing the world, hearing sounds, feeling feelings. And that's really who we most deeply are, this observer.

So this is five ways we've seen that we create a sense of I. And this creating a sense of I by connecting it to part of our experience is called identification. We identify the I as being just one part of experience.

Do any of these really stand up to logic? And moreover, have you ever found any of these as an individual being? Have you ever found that observer? Have you ever found the one who owns the body or who owns the emotion?

William James tried and he said, "When I search for myself, all I can find is a tickle at the back of my throat." It's a bit like that. It's quite subtle, this sense.

So we've used these words since we were old enough to understand. Before we were two years old, we were hearing and using these words. And just by the force of habit, we've come to believe that they actually point to something that exists. We believe that there is an I somewhere here that these words point to. That something exists that we can put our finger on if we're clever enough and say, "That's the self. That's what I really is."

You can search and search. You won't find it. The philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein said the self is just a shadow cast by grammar. We've used the language so much, we've come to believe in it, but it doesn't point to anything real.

Now there is a being here. There's no doubt about that. And there's a being there and there's a being there, but within this being is only an impermanent flow of body stuff and mind stuff. Always changing. Nothing is fixed within it. There's no core at the center that owns it, to whom it's happening, or who controls the whole thing. This is the understanding that the Buddha wanted to communicate.

This takes some reflection, because this sense is so conditioned. But through reflection and through meditation, we can explore it. For example, I'll bet that when you were meditating tonight, there were times when the I didn't seem that strong. When you're in a place that's calm and settled, it can feel peaceful, it can feel spacious and open, and it doesn't feel like there's such a strong center.

But at other times, the I can get really stirred up. Somebody says something rude to you. Driver cuts you off on the freeway. And all of a sudden this I springs up with some force. "How could they do that to me? I have to say something to them. I have to confront them about this." So then the I becomes very strong.

But at other times it can feel quite weak. So it's an easy way to investigate. Notice times when the sense of I is quite weak and other times when it feels really strong. So it's not just a steady ongoing thing, but it kind of grows and diminishes with time and circumstances.

So if the I in the Buddha's view isn't quite real, what is? There's this very interesting teaching that he gave that points to the basis for how Buddhists see what is real, what could be looked at, what should be investigated. This is a little text called the Discourse on Totality.

In this teaching, the Buddha said, "Listen, attend carefully, and I will teach you the totality of things." First of all, that's a very bold thing to say, isn't it? Just tune in—I'm going to teach you the totality in about two minutes. In the West, Einstein never said that. Marx never said that. Freud never said that. Here's the Buddha 2,500 years ago saying, "I'm going to teach you the totality."

And so he said, "What is the totality of things? 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 objects of mind"—which means basically thoughts and emotions.

Is there anything else in your experience that falls outside of these six categories? Basically it's sight, sound, smell, taste, touches, thoughts, and feelings. Is there anything else? Is this a fair description of our reality? It's pretty good, isn't it?

The reason this is so interesting is if you look at many philosophers, they talk about quite different things—how many angels dance on the head of a pin or is there a God? The Buddha was interested in pointing directly at our own experience. That's what's so radical about this formulation. He's saying if you

want to understand what matters, look at your own direct experience.

This becomes the basis for our meditation practice. We feel sensations of body and breath. We pay attention to sounds, when our eyes are open to sights, when we're walking, the sense of movement. And then we know our own thoughts and feelings. This becomes a map of where our meditation practice can focus.

The reason that's so helpful is it's in these areas that we get caught and we become unhappy. It's in relation to these six kinds of things that we suffer, and it's in relation to them that we can get free. This is quite interesting—there are only ever six things happening.

Normally, lay life seems really complicated, doesn't it? There are income taxes and jobs to carry out and children to look after and all the myriad problems of them coming into adulthood, or parents to care for with their aging process and loss of faculties. But in the pointings of the Buddha, there are only ever these six things to look at that make up our suffering or our liberation. It's a really interesting pointer to what really matters in life, a pointer of where to look.

What is interesting about this for our particular investigation this evening is how does the self, the sense of self, get created? Because we all have a sense of self, but the Buddha said the self isn't intrinsic. So how does it get created?

Again, I'll just ask you to look at your experience. You're sitting quietly. The sense of self—you'll notice it when the words are I, me, my, and mine. The language is the clue.

When you're sitting there, does it ever pop up and just go, "I"? Does it ever pop up and just go, "me"? Not really, does it? When you look at the way we form the concept of I or my, it's in relation to something else. There's a pain in this area, so I say, "my knee hurts." There's a memory about a friend, so I say, "I'm thinking about my friend."

The I and my are extras there. We could just say pain. We could just say memory. We could just say image. But we connect the I to it.

That means we identify and we add something there that doesn't have to be there.

Now the words are useful when we talk to each other. If I say to you, "I'm happy," what that identifies for you is where the emotion is taking place. That's different than if I say "James is happy." But that's just an indication of location. It doesn't mean we have to own it.

So the words are useful when we communicate, but when you describe your own experience to yourself, see what happens if you don't use these words. An emotion comes up and you could say, "I'm feeling really anxious today." Or you could just say, "Anxiety is arising and being known." See how it feels to make that just little change in language.

Notice that the sense of I isn't always there, but it gets created again and again and again when we lay claim to something. Also notice that when it's weak, there's generally a sense of peace. And when the I comes up strongly, there's usually some kind of turmoil going on. I want, I don't want, I like, I don't like, I need, I must—this strong attachment to I is integrally connected to our suffering. At times when it's weak, there's less suffering. There's a sense of deep peace.

So this is the sense of I, and the creation of self, that as we open it up, leads to one kind of emptiness, leads to more spaciousness, less anxiety, less self-concern and self-obsession.

The second sense in which emptiness is used classically is to explore the emptiness of phenomena. What that means is the things that we see in the world are not solid in the way that we think they are.

We're all good students of twentieth-century science, and we know quantum physics pointed this out like a hundred years ago. You know that the rug there is not mostly matter. What is it mostly? It's space, isn't it? Everything that you can see and touch, however solid it feels, is made up of atoms. Atoms are protons and neutrons orbited by electrons, and they are mostly space. So we know that this whole physical world truly is mostly space.

Has that made any of us a lot happier? It doesn't seem to have. I was a physics major in college. My professors did not seem a lot happier, and yet they really knew this. So what's happened? We haven't quite integrated it. We haven't taken in this knowledge and we haven't seen it directly for ourselves. So the aim of meditation is that we start to see some of this stuff for ourselves more directly.

I'll just read a passage from another of the Buddha's discourses. Again, it's a kind of wake-up call. He was giving a teaching. He was sitting on the banks of the River Ganges and giving a teaching to a group of students. And he addressed the students thus: "Monks, suppose that this River Ganges was carrying along a big lump of foam."

So I ask you to imagine that. If there's a big lump of foam, it really looks like there's something there, doesn't it? Big, with a certain color, a certain change of color, a certain texture. And yet what would happen if you went up to grab it? It would just go poof, wouldn't it? Because there's nothing really there.

"Suppose 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 matter there is, a practitioner 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 matter?"

This is basically the same insight that quantum physicists came to 2,400 years later, but the Buddha had realized it directly from his own meditation practice. And he's inviting us to learn it from our own meditation practice.

Just a simple way in: take the body as a place to check out. This is as close as we can get to knowing matter from the inside because our own awareness runs throughout the body. So what happens if you direct your awareness inside the body—you can do it right now—and ask, is there anything solid in your experience?

So we're talking about the field of sensations that we feel throughout the body. Is there any sensation in your body that is solid, fixed, and unchanging? Or when you look into the body, is it more like a dynamic field of energy that's characterized by pulsation, vibration, flickering, change, and variation? I encourage you to investigate now and at home in your meditation and see: is the body really solid, felt from within, or is it more characterized by change, by flickering, by pulsing? Take a look and see. If we can find that there's no solid matter felt from the inside, that gives us a certain amount of confidence. Maybe all matter is just like this body.

Another way that form is like a mass of foam. James and I were teaching at Spirit Rock one February retreat, and I was giving the Dharma talk that evening. So it was about eight o'clock at night, and outside the hall there was this loud scream—like a baby crying in some kind of pain, so it was unsettling. A couple of staff people left the room and went out to look to see what had happened, so I kept giving the talk.

The talk finished about eight-thirty, and then a number of us went out and looked to see what it was that had happened. Staff people had gathered around in a small circle around the body of a deer. The deer was lying on the ground near one of the residence halls with its neck at a really odd angle. The staff people had checked and found the deer was dead. They reported that as they came up to the deer, they saw a couple of large dogs running away from the site. That happens in Woodacre—there are dogs that roam the hills. There are a lot of deer, and occasionally dogs will kill a deer. But I'd never seen it happen at Spirit Rock.

So we knew the deer was dead, but we stood in a circle and said some phrases of loving kindness for the deer, hoping that it might help it on its journey. Then the staff people went in to call the Humane Society. "We've got a dead deer here. Could you come and pick it up?" The Humane Society said yes, they would. "We'll come tomorrow. Please take the body down near the entrance, and we'll come and get it." So the staff did that. They drove the deer down and laid it to rest by the parking lot right on the edge of the driveway.

But the Humane Society never came. Our retreat was going on for another couple of weeks, so I would pass the body every day and keep checking on it. So what do you imagine happened? Little by little, most of the body of the deer disappeared, because we have scavengers on the land. There are raccoons, there are turkey vultures, there are crows, there are mice, there are rats, there are insects. So every day that I went by, there was a little less of the deer there until after about ten days, there were only the hoofs, the fur, and the bones that were left. So the rest of that deer had just gone. Like a mass of foam. Poof. Nothing more left.

Another way to look at this: the Dalai Lama was giving a series of teachings a few years ago. I bet some of you were there. He was down at Shoreline Amphitheater in Mountain View, teaching on the Heart Sutra,

that central text to all the traditions. A number of us went down to hear the three days of teachings.

It was a beautiful setup. It was early May, about this time of year. At Shoreline, there's a big stage, there are a bunch of chairs in a semicircle, and then there's a very broad hillside, which at that time was still green because of the winter rains. You could sit out on the hill, look up to the Dalai Lama on his big throne on the stage, and he was surrounded by monastics from all the different traditions. There were Tibetan monks and nuns in their bright red and orange robes, Theravadan monks and nuns in the dark brown of the forest tradition, Korean monastics in their gray robes, Japanese Zen monks in their black robes. The whole stage was just a colorful show of Buddhist monastics.

Actually, it was like a Buddhist Woodstock. I kind of felt like we were at a festival, except where the speakers should have been for the Grateful Dead, there was a big painting of the Potala Palace as the backdrop.

The Dalai Lama was saying that the teachings in the Heart Sutra point to this understanding that there are three forms of suffering we encounter in life. One of them is what's called dukkha dukkha. Dukkha is the Pali word for suffering—it means the pain of life. Dukkha dukkha is the direct experience of what's painful or unpleasant. It's like a double shot of espresso—a double shot of dukkha, the pain of pain.

There's another way that suffering comes to us, which is when something has been pleasant for a while, but then it changes. If we're expecting it to continue, we suffer from the change. The bowl of ice cream finishes. The falling-in-love part of the relationship is over and we get down to working on living together. Pleasant things change and turn into difficulty—this is called the suffering of alternation.

Then the third kind is called the suffering of unstable formations. The Dalai Lama said it's really important to understand this if you really want to help people. It's not that things go along for a while in a solid way and then change to something else. Things are changing moment by moment in every moment of our experience. Nothing is solid even for a few moments. Another way to say it is that if you look closely at experience—and this is what the Buddha did with the body and with the senses—things are dissolving moment by moment. This is the instability of formations. There's nothing to rely on.

This is the seeing into emptiness. The emptiness of phenomena is directly understood when we see this moment-to-moment dissolving nature within our experience—sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, thoughts and feelings. Then we know we shouldn't hold on to things that are going to change. But we really see we can't hold on to anything that's dissolving. It's not possible. There's nothing solid enough to hold on to.

Both of these teachings—on impermanence and on the emptiness of phenomena—teach us not to grasp. Because we are conditioned to look for the next hit of something pleasing and to hold on to it for as long as we can. But that strategy doesn't ultimately work. It keeps us busy trying to find the next source of pleasure, but eventually it leaves us. And then we strive to find the next.

There's another way to live. The other way is we let go. In that letting go, we let go of some of the knot of

selfing that we create moment after moment, trying to bring in the pleasure and keep away the pain. We start to see we're empty in two ways. There's no fixed core at the center of this mind-body process that we have to keep protecting and defending. And the elements of our actual experience are all just coming and going, pulsing on and off, moment after moment. Both these insights teach us not to struggle and hold on, but to let go.

The way this letting go feels—and you can check this out in your meditation—is that it leads to a settling back into an observing of the present moment that doesn't have such a strong agenda, but is a relaxation and an ease and kind of letting life flow. It's like we relax into the Dharma that's unfolding, which is really just nature. And we trust in that. Nature can hold us. When we release the self-centered grasping, nature holds us. This is what brings in a much deeper sense of peace and ease in our day-to-day living.

Not only that, but this opening up to the unfolding of nature also prepares the mind for an even deeper letting go, which is an opening that leads to enlightenment. I don't use that word a lot in Dharma talks, but I wanted to mention it tonight because it is the purpose of the Buddha's teaching. It is to find the possibility of a peace that truly can liberate us from all forms of suffering. This is why the Buddha taught, and it is the kind of peace that people are still discovering today.

Both the spaciousness and ease that we can experience in meditation and in life come from letting go. And also letting go leads to this deeper opening to a truly liberating understanding.

What happens when we let go and relax into nature is that we see life is proceeding from many causes and conditions. It's led up to this moment. This moment couldn't be any different than it is because of all the causes and conditions that have led up to it. Then this moment conditions the next moment, which conditions the next moment with its causes and so forth. We start to see this unfolding is taking care of itself if we don't struggle.

Now sometimes, of course, we need to intervene in the world when things are going off track.

And we need to adjust the conditions that are happening in our personal life, in our family, in the greater society, in the environment, and in the world. But we can find through meditation the way to engage with that intervention in a way that comes from peace and ease rather than just more angst.

So the meditative opening is to allow all the causes and conditions to be seen and to unfold. And there are so many of these—physical causes, biological causes, chemical causes, emotional, psychological, social, karmic. All these causes and conditions are weaving through to make this very complex play of life. But we find a way to be in it from a place of relaxation and ease. And this is what happens when the tightness of the self starts to get unwound, and this knot that we might feel in the center of things starts to open up and relax.

I want to close with a story of one meditator at the time of the Buddha. He was a spiritual teacher already, named Bahiya. Bahiya was living in the south of India. The Buddha was teaching in the north. And Bahiya

was quite developed—he had many students, he lived very simply, he had a very pure mind. But one day he asked himself the question: Am I enlightened?

Well, the asking of that question is kind of a clue, because if you're enlightened, you know it. So it said a heavenly being came down and addressed Bahiya and said, "Bahiya, I'm sorry to tell you, but you're not enlightened. That's the bad news. The other bad news is you're not even on a path to enlightenment, because you're not doing the right practice."

So Bahiya was a little disappointed. But he said, "Well, do you know of anyone who is?" And this heavenly being said, "Yes, there's a teacher who goes by the name of the Buddha who's teaching currently in northern India. He's right now in the town of Savatthi, and you can go and visit him."

Bahiya would do anything for his spiritual practice, so he immediately left his home and started walking to the north to find the Buddha in the town of Savatthi. So he got to the town, and as he's walking around, he sees a person walking in a monk's robe who sort of matches the description he's heard. This being has a lot of dignity and a lot of radiance, a lot of beauty of spirit. So Bahiya walks up to him and says, "Are you the one they call the Buddha?"

The Buddha said, "Yes, I am."

"Please, sir, can you teach me your teaching briefly? I've come all the way across half of India. I really want to understand."

Well, at that time, the Buddha was walking with his alms bowl in search of his daily meal. So he said, "No, Bahiya, I'm sorry, I can't teach. This is not the right time. I'm walking for my morning meal."

But Bahiya was persistent. He said, "Please, sir, life is short. Who knows how long you may live or I may live? Please share your teaching briefly."

And again, the Buddha said, "This is not a convenient time. I'm walking for my midday meal."

But Bahiya didn't give up. He asked a third time, and as often happens, the third time the Buddha says, "Okay." And then he said, "This is how you should train, Bahiya. In the seen, let there be just the seen. In the heard, let there be just the heard. In the sensed, let there be just the sensed. In the cognized, let there be just the cognized."

Do you notice what's missing? It's not being claimed as "I" or "mine." "Then there will be no you in terms of that. When there is no you in terms of that, there is no you there. Then you will be neither here nor there nor in between. This, just this, is the end of suffering."

On hearing that profound instruction, Bahiya's mind woke up. He was so ripe, so ready. Because of his own spiritual practice, he was prepared to hear it. And he became awakened just upon hearing that brief teaching.

He thanked the Buddha and wandered off, probably looking for his midday meal. He happened to travel through a pasture where a mother cow was guarding her calf. The cow felt threatened, attacked Bahiya, and gored him. He died on the spot.

So his urgent request to the Buddha—"Who knows how long either of us will be here?"—was very timely indeed.

The monks were deeply concerned. They said, "Oh, Bhante, this person has come such a long way to see you, and then he died."

The Buddha reassured them: "Don't worry. He was awakened before he died. So his visit was fruitful, came to full maturation."

This is the potential power of seeing through the limitation of self. The letting go of self has been for 2,500 years a doorway to awakening and continues to be today. That's the power of emptiness. That's the power of this central teaching.

Thank you all very much for your attention. We have time for a couple of questions.

"Hello, Guy. Over the years in practice, I've had a very few, very brief experiences of walking around the world and not being Ernie. Nevertheless, there's still a location of perceptions. There's still a here and there's still something—some entity or being or gadget or whatever—that's walking around the world from that point of view. So who or what is that?"

I expect a number of you have had these moments of glimpsing the absence of self. The first thing I'll ask you to check in your experience is: How does that feel when the self temporarily is absent?

"It's very ordinary—just being in the world, except that I'm missing."

Is there peace and ease, or is there suffering?

"Peace and ease, yes. There's just a sense of being, basically."

When this happens, notice the emotional tone of that experience. See if it isn't one of peace and ease and absence of suffering. Many of us have had that kind of opening, and yet the self tends to come back. The sense of self tends to return.

"Very quickly, usually."

What I've observed is that the more I let myself open to these moments, and the more I understand the truth of it, the more my mind finds its way back to that way of being more and more often. Over time, one comes to stabilize in that kind of peace and ease and openness.

But the sense of self doesn't go away completely, according to the texts, until full enlightenment. So we

continue to observe its appearance, but as time goes by, we're not so taken in by it. We know—we have seen the truth many times. The self isn't always there, and it's not intrinsic.

As it fades away, the more the experience of life becomes one of non-separation and openness, receptivity, and ease. The self is a burden. The belief in the self is a burden that weighs us down with fear, anxiety, and desire. As that lifts, there's a greater sense of openness, and out of that openness comes easy access to qualities like love, compassion, and joy.

So as the self thins, it's not just a metaphysical event. There's an openness of heart that springs from that which makes life really rich and beautiful.

Any other questions? Yeah.

Isn't there a self that lets go of the self? Isn't there an entity—and I'm not being flippant about it—isn't there an entity that observes and that is actually making decisions that affect beyond the conditions? Something that observes all the experiences, all the objects of mind, reflects on them and says, "Oh, okay, now I understand," and adjusts what I would call the lower level self accordingly?

No, it's a really good question, and it's one that I do answer at greater length in the book. But to say really briefly, there is a sense of agency within us. And when I talked about how causes and conditions lead to the next moment, lead to the next moment, it shouldn't be taken as being deterministic. Because the spiritual path unfolds if you act as though there is free will—it's best to act that way. In fact, our will is somewhat conditioned.

You were pointing to the issue of deciding, and there's a sense of agency that makes decisions. That deciding is conditioned by many different factors, the most relevant of which are the states of mind that are present right then. For instance, decisions that come out of fear, anxiety, and upset are different than the kind of decisions that come out of love, compassion, and generosity.

So there is not one entity that makes a decision, but there is a factor of mind called volition that operates in any given moment, influenced by the other qualities of mind that are present there. An impulse, an urge, a motive, a direction, a movement comes out of this factor of volition influenced by the other mind states that are present right there. There's not an entity that's doing that decision, but there is an agency that acts.

Similarly, there's not an observer, but there's a faculty of observing. This is interesting. So mindfulness is one faculty of observing. There's not an entity who is being mindful, but mindfulness is a factor that comes into our experience and carries out that observing function. So these are great questions. They can all be explored and resolved within your meditation.

Thank you. And there was one more question up front, if we could hit that one.

Now I've kind of forgotten what I was going to say exactly, but something around compassion and

empathy—the fine line between detachment and having empathy and compassion and then doing something about it. Maybe having to take a few steps to help someone, rather than saying, "Oh, that's just the way it happens, like, let it be or whatever." Does that make sense?

No, it's a really good question because if one only dwells on the emptiness side of things... you could start seeing everybody as just collections of atoms and molecules, right? The scientific worldview—and I was kind of into this in my teens because I was studying physics—was just seeing people as collections of atoms and molecules. And it doesn't really matter what happens to atoms and molecules, right?

When you start seeing the emptiness of things, you could take it in a direction that says it doesn't matter what happens because it's all empty. That's a real misreading of the Buddha's teachings.

So the way I like to say it is that the insight into emptiness needs to grow up in parallel with the unfolding of love and compassion in our meditation practice and in our direct experience. Then when we look on others who are going through difficulty, the lack of our own self-obsession actually opens the door for more empathy to come through. And because the boundaries have melted somewhat, we don't feel so separate from the people who are going through difficulty.

So we say in our tradition, compassion comes out of emptiness. When there's emptiness of self, then the heart flowers. One of the things that we encourage is to let compassion flower and it will direct you what needs to be done.

Compassion isn't just a sweet feeling. It's an active wish to relieve the suffering of others. So it carries a little bit of that volition that we were just talking about a minute ago. And if there's real emptiness, then that volition can move forward without fear to act in the world. We need this compassionate response in the world—on the relationship level, on the family level, on the social level, on the global level.

I feel like if something is making you anxious or upset or suffer because you see something happening, then that's a good thing that it incites you to do something. But I guess it's kind of hard to... well, I don't know.

Yeah, sometimes suffering can be a spur to action. But I'll just say that you look at a lot of great spiritual teachers like the Dalai Lama in this day, the Buddha in his day, Dipa Ma, if you know of her—the teacher James and I met—they are coming from a place of being basically at peace, and yet they have tremendous energy to help others and be very active in the world in caring ways. So suffering doesn't have to be the only spur to taking compassionate action. And the more selfless we become, the less it acts in that way.

How would you say to keep yourself detached from that, but still be motivated?

So in the Buddhist language, the word we use so much is not detachment but equanimity, or rather I would say balance. Balance is the state where we feel a kind of inner equilibrium or equipoise. We're kind of at rest and things are okay. But if we see suffering outside, there's a movement to alleviate.

And that's the natural movement of compassion. So we let that flow in its natural way when we're already in a balanced place.

I think that's all I want to say tonight, and James is going to wrap up the evening for us with some metta meditation. So thank you all for coming. If anybody wants a book signed, I'd be happy to sign books afterward.

James offered a beautiful reflection: "First, thanks so much for the talk—as usual, clear on a very deep topic. One thing about how I approach this subject is that one way of looking at reality does not negate the other. So it's not like, 'Oh, you don't really exist. Who do you think you are anyway? You're empty.' Rather, when you see this other perspective, it brings a whole other way of holding this pattern of life called James or Guy or whoever.

There's this pattern that is uniquely yours, but it's not fixed and static. It's an ongoing transformative flux of life with its own history and all that—something you want to both respect and take care of, to discover its gifts and share them with the world. It just brings a whole other way to be light about your life. You know that you stop on the red light and go on the green, following all the rules of relative reality, but you're coming from a much freer place. So don't give up on who you are—just know the freedom that comes with seeing a wider perspective. May this support you in having the courage and interest to keep looking inside."

We closed with a brief loving-kindness meditation. James guided us: "Just going inside, appreciating that we're all here sharing the Dharma together and recognizing what extraordinarily good karma we have to be here in Berkeley, hearing a lovely Dharma talk and coming together with like-minded friends. May we share all of our good fortune and merit and good karma that we brought to this evening and that we created here together. Coming here this evening, may it be shared and be for the benefit of all beings everywhere and this beautiful planet Earth. May all know the highest happiness and peace."

As we concluded, there was a heartfelt wish: "May the earth heal soon. May that be so."

Transcriptions produced locally using Swiss low-carbon electricity. Corrections and rewriting by cloud-hosted AI.