Morning Instructions: Abiding in Emptiness

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 44:40

This morning's meditation will be a guided practice on the theme of abiding in emptiness. It's based on a discourse in the Majjhima Nikaya, number 121, the shorter discourse on emptiness, which Sally mentioned in her talk the other night. This guided meditation relies somewhat on visualization, so it's not strictly a "recognize and rest" kind of practice. It will be a little more active than that, but it will lead in a similar direction. Please be patient with the process.

Before we begin, let me first guide you to establish your meditation posture by resting easily in the present moment. Bring your attention into the body, finding in your posture a balance of uprightness and relaxation.

Notice how you could describe your experience in two ways. You could say the awareness fills your body—feel that quality, with the emphasis on awareness in the body. Or you could say awareness holds the body, with a sense of the wider awareness that the body exists within. So awareness is in the body, or the body is in awareness. Simply rest as comfortably as possible in the present moment.

Now I'd like to invite you into a visualization, a fabrication, an imagination. Imagine that you're up in an airplane, cruising above the town of Barre, looking down at the forests, the roads, the houses, the traffic, the people, the town. You're reasonably high up, so you can see quite a distance.

First, notice the small town of Barre. If you haven't driven through it, it's a typical small New England town laid out around the square, with the post office, a bank, police station, food stores, gas station, and restaurants. You can imagine all the traffic passing through. At this time of day, people are going to work, commuting, heading off to schools and offices, stopping for food or gas, getting out of cars, walking around, greeting one another.

As you connect with these images, this visualization, let yourself make any associations that come around the activities of a town, around the people. Perhaps some pets are out—cats stealing around, dogs out for a walk. Get a sense of all the activities and the hustle and bustle of a town on a Monday morning.

Now the plane continues flying and heads a couple of miles north. You're over the area of the Forest Refuge and the retreat center, the IMS land, the study center, and all the woods and fields around them. Looking down, you see that the traffic is reduced but still present—cars driving by, staff arriving for work. Yogis may be sitting in the halls or out walking. There are retreats at all three centers. Cooks are busy, office people are booting up their computers.

Again, let your mind make any associations you have with any of the centers in this area—the Forest

Refuge, the retreat center, the study center, any people you've known there, any experiences you've had, any staff you've known. Get a sense that even at a retreat center, a lot of human activity goes on. Bring in the creatures too—the birds, the squirrels, the chipmunks, the deer, porcupines. Notice that although it's not as busy as the town, there's still a considerable extent of activity and associations around this area for you.

Now direct the plane to hover just above the Forest Refuge.

Looking down on the buildings, staff and teacher housing, administration building, dining hall, council house, residence halls, meditation hall, and all the people in those buildings—housekeeping staff, facilities, kitchen, office, meditators.

As you look down, you can also see the trees, the lawn, the central courtyard, the fields, the lupine and other flowers, the roads and new paving. As you connect with all these areas of the forest refuge, let any associations or memories just come. Moments you've seen people, interacted with people, experiences you've had in meditating or in working or in dining.

Forest refuge is a lot more tranquil than the town of Barry. And yet still you can find the perception of activity of people, of creatures, associations.

So now coming just above the meditation hall, looking down on the square roof of the hall, and then coming inside. Imagine that you can be toward the ceiling of the interior of the hall and looking down.

So you see all the meditators, all of us here meditating, quite still, not much activity. See all the other things in the room—the chairs, zabutons, zafus, shawls, plants toward the front, meditation bell, the platform, the podiums.

Let any associations come to you. Connections with the people here, connections with experiences in the hall. Anything that comes to mind. Notice that the simplifying of the field, the simplifying of the activity might also feel more tranquil.

Now you're still within the hall, but you're more like at your own eye level. Direct your attention just to the container of this hall—your visual image of the hall. You can open your eyes if you'd like to refresh it, refresh that image.

But as you connect with the hall now in your visualization, just focus on the walls, the floor, and the ceiling. So there's the front wall behind the altar and Buddha statue. The side walls looking onto the forest. The rear wall, which has the shoji screen. So just perceiving in the hall the floor, the walls, and the ceiling, disregarding the rest.

Other images may come into your mind of people or other things. Just let them go. Return to the perception of floor, walls, and ceiling. Notice how it feels to simplify your perception in this way. Notice there are not as many associations or memories. So as the perceptions simplify, we say they are present

with what we are perceiving, but they are absent of what we are not perceiving. Simply floor, walls, and ceiling.

We can simplify our perception still further. Within this container bounded by floor, walls, and ceiling, now bring your attention just to the space in the room, the empty space bounded by floor, walls, and ceiling. Just perceiving the empty space in the room, just free from the perceptions of objects.

If it would help you to connect with the space to open your eyes briefly, feel free to do that. Get a sense of the size, direction of the space that's in front of you, to the sides, behind you, above, perhaps below.

How does it feel to abide with the perception of space? Space is present, but this perception is empty of the earlier perceptions of people and things.

Although the physical space in the room is bounded by floor, wall, ceiling, can you get the sense that, in fact, there is also physical space on the other side, other side of the windows, other side of the roof, below the floor? You get the sense that the space inside connects to the space outside. And then that space stretches on and on. Doesn't have a boundary. Doesn't have an edge.

Letting the attention be wide and open, just in touch with space as far as it feels to you that it extends. Space without boundary. What's the feeling of the perception of that wide space, that unbounded space?

And then turning the attention toward awareness. Can awareness know this unbounded space? Wherever the space extends in front and behind, to right and left, above and below—is awareness there too? However far the space extends, does awareness extend that far also?

How can you feel that this awareness is as wide as the space that you can perceive? And because that space doesn't have an edge or boundary, awareness doesn't have an edge or boundary.

How does it feel to be with this perception of awareness in its unbounded nature?

So now simply resting in the spaciousness of this unbounded awareness.

If the attention becomes distracted from the perception of the awareness, don't worry about it—that will happen. And when the attention returns, then either connect again directly with this spacious awareness, or go through a few steps to find it: receiving floor, wall, ceiling, receiving space in the hall, extending it to wide space outdoors as well, and then to awareness. Its boundless spacious quality.

This meditation was adapted from a discourse in the Majjhima Nikaya. It's not a strict relating of it, but you might like to go to the original and read it. You'll find two other steps. And the terms the Buddha uses are a little different.

As we get into the space that goes beyond here, the Buddha calls it the perception of infinite space. I like to interpret that in my experience as boundless. I found boundless a little easier to come to grips with than infinite. And similarly with awareness, he uses the term infinite consciousness. Moving from infinite

space and then what knows it? Infinite consciousness. Again, I think boundless awareness is more in line with our vocabulary.

And then he adds two more steps, which are the perception of nothingness and neither perception nor non-perception. And if you know the sequence of samatha instructions, these are the four formless attainments: the sphere of infinite space, infinite consciousness, nothingness, and neither perception nor non-perception, which are states that are more developed than the four jhanas—the four form jhanas.

But it's important to understand that in this discourse the Buddha is not requiring us to be immersed or absorbed in those states. It's only the perception of those qualities that we're asked to undertake. So just being able to perceive boundless space is enough for this meditation. We don't have to be absorbed in it. Being able to perceive boundless awareness is enough. We don't have to be absorbed in infinite consciousness. And then I've omitted the last two steps because they're quite subtle.

If you'd like to read more, you can read the original sutta. And Bhikkhu Analayo has a chapter that includes this meditation in his book, Compassion and Emptiness. He gives more detail. And he came to the last APP retreat and taught on this discourse, so some of you are a little familiar with his approach from that.

So if you found this helpful as a way into boundless awareness, feel free to bring it in. If you can simply turn and recognize, no problem. Whatever's easy for you.

Could you feel as the focus narrowed from the big broad town of Barry down to the retreat center and then into the hall and then container and then space, could you feel how it tended to quiet the mind? As the perception simplified, the mind got quieter. That's the purpose of it. That's the function.

So this is a helpful thing to remember. Ajahn Sumedho used to give regular instructions on noticing space. So if you're in the middle of a meeting, let's say in daily life, and emotions are starting to get volatile in the meeting, try noticing the space in the room that everything's happening in. Again, space removes pressure. And so the perception of space opens up ease in the mind. This can be a useful instruction even in daily life.

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