Deepening in Emptiness

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 1:06:44

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Our topic for tonight is titled "Unfolding in Emptiness," or you could also call this "Emptying"—either one as you like. We're going to do a quick overview of some of the facets of the unfolding of emptiness through our dharma path. We could talk all night and probably a whole weekend just on this topic, but we're going to condense it and hit some of the high points.

We're going to offer two guided meditations: one at the beginning, followed by a dharma talk, and then another guided meditation toward the end. In the last part of the evening, I want to allow plenty of time for comments, questions, and discussion for you all to join in.

I should mention that I'm not used to teaching at night in this room—I'm in my office. I'm not quite sure how the lighting will be. I've got as many lights on as I can find, but if we have to call the game on account of darkness, well, that's just one of the things that happens in the springtime. At least you can hear me if it gets dark.

Let's begin with a meditation. Please sit as you would for your own meditations. Sit comfortably in a relaxed way, but also feel an uprightness in your body so that the spine is reasonably straight. Feel some erectness through the upper part of the body, which brings in a sense of alertness and energy. At the same time, you can let your weight drop into the sitting base. Know that the earth holds you and supports you, and you can rest there.

If you feel comfortable in your sitting posture, you can let your eyes gently close. If you're not comfortable having your eyes closed, you're welcome to keep them open.

Take as your first meditation focus the body in the sitting posture. Have the sense that your awareness pervades the whole body, that you could direct your attention anywhere in the body and feel sensations or an absence of sensation in that part of the body. You can check through the head, the shoulders and arms, the back, the chest and belly, the hips, and the legs. Awareness is found throughout the body. You can notice either sensation or a lack of it anywhere you'd like to direct the attention.

Sometimes we like to take the whole body posture as an anchor or a focus in mindfulness practice. See if we can take in the whole body posture with one look. We may not get it all, and that's fine, but have a sense that the awareness can spread out a bit and take in a good part of the body in sitting. Rest with your

attention to some degree on the whole body posture.

As you're connecting with the body in sitting, begin to notice what happens when you breathe. Every time you breathe in, certain sensations arise in the body. Every time you breathe out, other sensations happen. Maintain this overall awareness of the body in sitting and just feel the sensations that come from breathing in and breathing out. You don't have to try to alter the breath to make it long or short or deep or shallow. Just breathe naturally and feel the sensations that come.

From time to time, you may lose touch with the sensations of breathing because the attention may get captured by a thought or a train of thoughts. This is natural, as you know, and can happen often in meditation practice. The attention may go into a thought for a few seconds, or a quarter of a minute, or a few minutes. But at some point, the attention will return to the present moment, and again, you can feel the body and breathing.

Normally in vipassana instructions, we simply say: when the attention returns to the present moment, just notice that a thought was there, don't judge it, and let the attention return to feel the body and breath. But in this meditation, I want to ask you to do a little bit of investigation with the thought that you've just noticed.

You've returned to the present moment; a thought has just taken place, or perhaps a train of thinking. I'd like to ask you to take a quick look at the content of that thought to see what it was about. Once you've noticed the content and have a sense of what it was about, then return the attention to the body and breath.

Please practice in this way for the next several minutes, feeling the breath in the whole body. When you notice that a thought has taken the attention for a while, just investigate to find: what was that thought about?

For the last couple of minutes of the sitting, I'll ask you to reflect a little bit. Having noticed the content of a number of thoughts, I want you to investigate one more thing: Was there a common thread to those thoughts? Any common theme that you might identify that those thoughts share?

Take just a minute to review the thoughts you noticed and see if anything links them together.

The meditation bell has rung, so you can open your eyes and return to the group. I'll pick up the dharma talk now, coming back to the questions I asked you to investigate, but first I want to open with the theme of the evening.

We're talking about unfolding and emptiness. We should explore what this word means. The basic meaning of emptiness, which many of you already know, is that everything in our experience is not solid or substantial, even though it might appear that way. This applies to the events of our inner experience as well as the objects of the world in our outer experience.

This sounds simple, but there are actually many assumptions embedded in this statement, and the full unpacking of its implications can take quite a bit of practice.

Something to say very clearly upfront is that emptiness in the Buddhist context is not a blank or a vacancy or a nothingness or nihilism. It's not leading to despair or an emotional state of deadness. It's not any of those things with negative connotations. I think the word is provocative for us and sort of forces us to ask, "What is the Buddha talking about here?" But I think it was probably provocative in his day as well, maybe even more so because there were so many philosophical systems floating around that tried to explain through concepts the way the world worked.

It's a term that makes us sit up and question, that makes us wonder a little bit. But please throw out the idea that it's going to lead somewhere depressing, because that's not where we're headed.

Emptiness, when understood in our experience, is an insight that enriches life. So much so that people say the understanding of emptiness really leads them to feel the fullness of the life they have. I think that's a good way to hold it: emptiness leads into a feeling of fullness.

The aim is for us to free our hearts and minds. It's not about some intellectual theory or a grand philosophical notion. It's a very practical tool designed for us to free ourselves.

This was brought home to me when I was watching a DVD I've had for a while—a series of teachings that the Dalai Lama gave in Tucson a few years back on a chapter in Shantideva's *Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life*, specifically the chapter on wisdom. He started off by remarking that he'd been in Tucson thirteen years prior to the current visit where the filming was being done. That was a nice way to reconnect with this audience because he probably met a number of them before.

Then he said, "Yes, since thirteen years ago, oh, I haven't made much progress." And everybody laughed because you don't think that the Dalai Lama needs to make much progress. But he still practices in a very dedicated way and is still committed to his own full awakening. It was wonderful to hear his humility and lightness around that.

But then he went on to say that what little progress he had made came from a deepening understanding of his bodhisattva vow and further insights into emptiness. That's the Dalai Lama—over the past thirteen years, more insights into emptiness. He's still learning and growing and developing from this area.

We're not going to get it all in one night or in one retreat, but it's a very rich and full teaching. In fact, one of the things I want to say tonight, and the reason I titled the talk the way I did, is that the entire path we're on can be understood as a deepening in emptiness. When we understand it correctly, it is emptiness that takes us from the beginning to the middle to the end—to liberation. Even nibbana is described as the supreme emptiness. So it is a thread that we can follow all along the course of our own journey of awakening.

There are two primary meanings within the whole Buddhist tradition of the term, and these can be summed up as emptiness of self and the emptiness of sense phenomena.

This is where I want to come back to the first meditation we did this evening. When you looked at the thoughts that came and took you away from the present moment, briefly or for a while, did you find a common theme? We don't really have time right now to hear your reports on that, but what I find when I look closely at my thoughts in this way is that the thoughts that take me away are all about me. They're all about myself in one form or another. They're about I, me, and mine.

Those are the thoughts that grab me. Those are the thoughts that claim my attention. And those are thoughts around areas where I've invested energy in my life—things that I care about because I have some self-interest about them. They show different facets. It could be about my work, my relationship, my health, my family, my finances, my friends. But they are all areas that are near and dear to me. That's what takes me away from the present moment.

I don't find myself waking up in the middle of a long string of thoughts about how to solve the humanitarian crisis in Yemen. That's not what's grabbing me. It's self-centered thinking and the emotions that go along with that. In this way, you come to see that the self is kind of like the North Star of our life—that point in the heaven that everything else revolves around. This North Star is central to the way we think and feel and view ourselves and life and the world.

The next thing that's interesting to look at, although we didn't get into this investigation this evening, is: did any of the thoughts go on for a while? Sometimes in meditation, there'll be a thought and you're just gone for a few seconds and then right back in the present moment—body, breath, sounds, whatever. But sometimes a train comes along that seems very interesting. We hop on the train, go down the tracks, and it could be half a minute, a minute, even fifteen minutes before we come back and notice, "Oh, here's the body and here's breath."

These long thought excursions have a special name in the Buddha's teachings. They are called proliferations. You get the sense of how one builds upon the next, builds upon the next, and you're off on a long journey of mental proliferation. The Pali term for this is quite good: papañca. It has that kind of punchy quality to it. Papañca means proliferation.

The commentaries—the Buddha didn't say this, but the commentaries—identify three primary forces that drive proliferation. It's very interesting to start tuning into these forces as well that lead us on these thought trains, to see if they line up with this traditional explanation. It's said that the thought trains are driven in three ways: by craving, by views, and by conceit. In Pali, this is tanhā, diṭṭhi, and māna. Māna, or conceit, is not as commonly spoken of, but it basically means the belief "I am," or the sense "I am." Māna is the deep tendency of mind to try to locate ourselves somehow, somewhere.

So see if your thoughts could be summed up—I like to sum these up as "I want," "I think," and "I am."

Things I want in the world, views and opinions that I hold that kind of define me, or "I am" in relation to someone or something else. This is often our role in society, in our family, or in our work. I want, I think, I am. This is a lot of what makes up our proliferations. They're all just different expressions of self.

So what's the problem? Well, as you know, these selfing thoughts can lead into a lot of suffering. They're often bound up with reactive emotions of greed or aversion or confusion. These are the forces that drive us. These are the expressions of tanhā, of craving, really.

This is again from the Dalai Lama: "One of the most important insights in Buddhism comes from what is known as the understanding of emptiness. At its heart is the deep recognition that there is a fundamental disparity between the way we perceive the world, including our own experience in it, and the way things actually are."

This is sobering. The disparity between the way we perceive the world and the actuality of the world—in this gap is where suffering is born. So the whole point of our meditation practice, the whole point of insight meditation, is for us to see things the way they actually are. This is the meaning of vipassanā, because it said that

When we see things the way they are, we come to peace. We come to freedom and we live with wisdom. This is why we meditate. So emptiness is a pointer to that gap between how we think things are and the way things actually are.

You probably know that for many years of his life—the last twenty-five years of his life—the Buddha was attended by his cousin Ananda, who was one of the sweetest figures in the whole Pali Canon. He cared very much for the Buddha and took great care of all the visitors who came to see him. Because they spent so much time together, Ananda had the chance to ask all the dharma questions that he wanted.

So at one point he came to the Buddha and said, "Blessed one, it is said empty is the world, empty is the world. What does this mean?"

And the Buddha replied, "The world is empty because it's empty of a self or what belongs to a self. The world is empty of a self."

That's a challenging statement. There's no basis in reality for this belief in self. But wait—that's our North Star. Everything in life revolves around self, and you're telling me there's no basis for it?

This is really the same as the Buddha's teaching on not-self, or anatta, which I'm sure you've heard in many dharma talks before. In this first part, emptiness of self is equivalent to the teaching on not-self, or anatta.

But if that's the case, what does the Buddha mean by "the world"? What is empty of self? This is important to clarify.

This is described in a discourse called the Discourse on Totality, where the Buddha says, "Bhikkhus"—which means for us practitioners; we're all bhikkhus if we're sincere in practice—"what is the totality of things? Listen, attend carefully, and I will teach you the totality of things. It is simply the eye and sights, the ear and sounds, the nose and smells, the tongue and tastes, the body and sensations, the mind and mind objects. Anyone who said they were going to describe anything beyond this as the totality of things would not be speaking of something they knew about."

So what the Buddha is describing here is our own direct experience of the six senses: the five physical senses—sight, sound, smell, taste, touch—and the mind door, mind objects, which are basically thoughts and emotions, states of mind. This is the totality of things.

This is quite a lovely statement, especially from a great spiritual teacher, because we're not pointing to some abstract notion or some remote ideal like union with Brahma. The Buddha is directing us to look at our immediate experience. This is really what sets the stage for our meditation practice, for mindfulness practice, because mindfulness is to become aware of our direct experience of these six kinds of sense happenings. As Joseph Goldstein likes to say, there are only ever six things going on.

So this is the field that we need to get really familiar with, become free in. As we explore these six kinds of sense happenings with our mindful attention, one of the things we ask early on is: are these things permanent or impermanent? Sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, mind objects. Have any of them ever lasted for you? No. They're all impermanent.

What's missing from this list? The self. There's no self in this description of our experience. And what do we understand as an assumption about the self? There are several hidden assumptions, and I won't go into all of them tonight—I do talk about them in the book—but one of the key ones is continuity. We think the self is ongoing, in some way has been the same since we were in grade school up until today, and will be the same until we die. But none of the facets of our experience at the senses meet that criterion. And that's how we know something's off in our concept of the self.

Well, how do we know that we have this assumption of continuity? Because we're worried about dying. We think it is this self that is going to meet death one day. If we thought someone else was dying, we wouldn't be as worried. But we think "I'm going to die" and therefore we worry.

So vipassana practice or mindfulness practice in the Eightfold Path takes this view of totality—the six senses—as our field of practice. We develop skill in paying attention to all these things as they arise and as they pass away, as they arise and as they pass away. So immediately,

We are coming out of the field of mental proliferation and into the reality of sense experience. This is a big deal. We're retraining the mind not to get lost in the broad, expansive fields of papañca. We are training the mind to stick with the reality of the six senses. Instead of going into the field of papañca where we increase "I want," "I think," "I am"—where the self just proliferates—we come into reality, and that selfing

gets starved. We don't give it the attention we had been giving it that feeds the sense of self.

Not only that, but when we start to examine the nature of these sense appearances, we find something else that's interesting.

A few years ago, I was down in your neck of the woods and the Dalai Lama was giving a series of talks at Shoreline Amphitheater. I don't know if any of you were there, but it was a lovely occasion. It might have been in May because it was sunny, but not baking hot. He was up on the big stage up front. If you know the amphitheater, there are lots of rows of seats in a semicircle and then a big grassy lawn, so you could either sit in a chair or go back and put a blanket out on the lawn. The big speakers that normally would be used to blast the Grateful Dead back in those days were full of the Dalai Lama's voice. It was just a delightful setting to listen to him.

He was talking on the Heart Sutra, which is all about emptiness—one of the key texts in the Mahayana. The theme he was on was dukkha and how we get led into suffering. He explained there are three kinds of dukkha, and this comes straight out of the Pali Canon.

There's dukkha-dukkha, which is the straightforward form of suffering—painful experience of body and mind. There's vipariṇāma-dukkha, which is the pain of alternation. That means something goes along that's pleasant for a while, but then it changes. It alternates and becomes neutral or unpleasant. In any case, we lose the pleasure of it.

And then he said there's the unsatisfactoriness of conditioned phenomena, which is called saṅkhāra-dukkha. There he explained the problem is not simply that impermanence means something goes on for a while and then changes or goes away. When we look into the unsatisfactoriness of conditioned phenomena, what we see is that every appearance at a sense door is arising and vanishing, arising and vanishing, moment after moment after moment. This takes us into the field of the emptiness of phenomena.

All the phenomena that the Buddha described as being in reality, as being in totality, none of them last more than momentarily. This is something that we discover through our practice of vipassana, through insight meditation, as the concentration deepens. This is seen quite clearly.

So in a way, this aspect of saṅkhāra-dukkha explains the difference between just seeing impermanence and seeing emptiness. When we recognize impermanence, we know that nothing is really going to last forever. But some things seem like they last quite a long time—like the smell of the new car we've had for three months already, or a new relationship that we're really quite into might last three months.

But saṅkhāra-dukkha shows that nothing is lasting in a substantial way for more than a moment. So both seeing into impermanence and seeing into emptiness are taught for the same reason: to persuade us not to hang on. Because if we're hanging on to the pleasant, it's going to hurt when it goes. Impermanence says it's going to change. What emptiness shows in saṅkhāra-dukkha is there's nothing solid there to hang on to

in the first place.

Every appearance is truly insubstantial and therefore ungraspable. In many cases, all that we can hang on to is a memory to which we've given a name. We call it "a good meditation" or "my partner" or something. Once we've given it a name, then we can hang on to the name and the memory. But the thing itself keeps changing as we look at it.

So as we see into impermanence, it does wear away the sense of self. It reduces clinging, and clinging is what gives rise to a sense of self. The Buddha put it this way: "When the perception of impermanence is developed and cultivated, it eliminates all sense desire, it eliminates all ignorance, and it uproots all conceit of 'I am.'" This is a powerful statement about seeing impermanence, one of the three characteristics. It leads to a very full experience of the Dhamma.

So as we come into the present moment, we're more in touch with reality. Selfing is getting starved.

So the self starts to be reduced just through our normal mindfulness practice. We are more in touch with reality. There is less giving rise to papañca of "I want, I think, I am." And we are less inclined to cling because we see that nothing is substantial enough to cling to. All these things go on in our practice.

Of course, these insights take quite some time. They take years to develop and come to fruition, but they do come. And so the self exerts less—I would say—gravitational pull.

The gravitational pull of the self is basically felt as a contraction. The self is trying to hold on, to solidify, to cling to, to bring things in. And in that there's a narrowing, there's a narrowing of focus to the desired objects, to draw them in and hold onto them. And that shrinks our being somewhat.

As we let go, there's a widening that happens. There's a relaxation in the body and a greater ease. And with that, the mind sort of spreads more outward. There's an opening, there's a widening. And then at some times, the self can even temporarily go away.

You might know this poem by Li Po, the Chinese poet:

"The birds have vanished down the sky
Now the last cloud drains away.
We sit together, the mountain and me,
until only the mountain remains."

So these moments come in meditation when the self temporarily just isn't present, may not be present at all for a period of time in our meditation or in nature perhaps. There may even be an awakening, an awakening to our deepest nature.

Do either of those things always uproot the self formations completely? No. The selfing activities are deeply conditioned and they don't stop so easily, even though they've been seen through, even though

we've understood there's no actual self there.

This is from a Korean Zen teacher named Seongcheol: "Although one has awakened to one's deepest nature, the beginningless habit energies are extremely difficult to remove suddenly. And so one must continue to cultivate while relying on this awakening. Through this gradual permeation, one's endeavors reach completion. Hence, it is called gradual cultivation."

So what Seongcheol is pointing to here is a kind of intermediate stage on the path, isn't it? We've reached some understandings. We've seen through the self. There may even have been a partial awakening. And yet the activities of the self are still going on. We can see them. We know that they're not leading in the right direction—they're just more "I want, I think, I am"—but they're compulsive. We can't stop them so easily.

So at this point, we might want to start reflecting on these patterns that I would call our personality. We'd say our personality consists of our habitual ways of thinking, feeling, speaking, and acting. This is how we come to know somebody. We observe them, we notice how they tell us how they think and feel, we observe how they speak and act, and we see ourselves in the same way. We know well how we think and feel, and we can observe our speech and actions.

So we get a sense of our personality shaped in a certain way. Each person has their own kind of unique combination of mental traits that lead to these actions. It's consistent to some extent, right? You kind of know your friend is going to be a certain way. You kind of know you're going to be a certain way, reacting to different circumstances, but it's within some variety, within certain bounds.

There's a consistency to personality, even as we understand there's no self there. There's no solid core at the middle. If there were, we couldn't be liberated. We couldn't be free.

That solid core would get stuck and would block the true liberation, the uprooting of all ignorance, the ending of the conceit "I am." There's no solid core. So the personality is really malleable.

And yet, as we observe even from this partly awakened place, we see the same habit patterns repeating again and again and again. This can be frustrating. We've seen the emptiness of self, we've seen the emptiness of phenomena, and yet the grasping continues. If we look more closely, the habits of greed continue, the habits of aversion continue, the habits of fear continue, or the habits of confusion. We all have different varieties of these, but they are all variations on the theme of the defilements of greed, aversion, and delusion.

These patterns are volitional. They are not just random. They are built on things that we want, on views, on sense of self. We have generated these patterns ourselves. They are volitionally formed. As the Buddha says, "Whatever a person frequently thinks or ponders upon, that will become the inclination of their mind." So we could call these our volitional formations. It's a synonym for our personality.

Interestingly enough, "volitional formations" is the name the translators give to the fourth aggregate, which is sankhara—states of mind that are put together from these impulses, greed, aversion, and delusion. We start to understand that this is a deeply conditioned part of our approach to the world, a deeply conditioned way that we see ourselves and others.

We may have come into meditation practice hoping that there would be a quick resolution, a speedy resolution of this desire force or this angry force or this fearful force or this confusion that leads us into suffering. But it's not so quick. Even with understanding, as we do, it's not so quick.

At this stage, we really need to trust that the dharma is doing its work. Sometimes in this stage, people see, "Oh, I still have the same conditioned responses to things. I still get anxious. I still get frightened. I still have so much wanting or ambition or craving for control or something like that. Am I not going anywhere? Is the path really not helping?"

But the path is helping. The path is working, because one of the things that I can almost guarantee is happening is that the intensity of those conditioned reactions is decreasing. And perhaps even the frequency with which they come is decreasing. But sometimes we don't step back and take a look at that. We just see, "Oh, I still have anxiety. The anxiety isn't going away. Oh, the practice isn't working. It's never going to lead to freedom."

This is where we have to renew our trust in the dharma. We have to trust the process.

Nagarjuna was a brilliant author around 100 to 150 of the common era, one of the early teachers in the school that later became the Mahayana. His central work is all about emptiness. It's called "Root Verses on the Middle Way," available in a number of English translations. It's really a wonderful book to deepen one's understanding of emptiness. If the Buddha was the king of emptiness, Nagarjuna is the prince in our tradition. He's a very interesting lineage to study.

One of the things Nagarjuna says is that emptiness stops papañca. Emptiness stops papañca. So the more we penetrate the truth of emptiness, both on the level of self and on the level of phenomena, it undercuts this tendency to run off into "I want, I think, I am." It cuts through and can eventually halt that string of papañca that gets us involved in so much selfing and the attendant suffering.

We have to trust in that. The Buddha put it this way: when a carpenter looks at the handle of their ax,

They see the impression of their fingers and thumb, but they don't know how much of the ax handle has been worn away today, so much yesterday, so much earlier. But when it has worn away, the knowledge occurs to them that it has worn away. So we don't know how much of the ax handle is still to go or how much has been worn away from yesterday or the day before, but we do know that it is wearing away. And this is what we have to trust in.

Basically what is happening is that emptiness and our attention—giving ourselves to the present moment,

starving those self-generating papañca patterns—is wearing away the confusion, the kilesas, the greed, and the aversion. All those karmic patterns, we call them karmic patterns because they spring from our own volition. Volition, as you probably know, is at the heart of karma. It is whether our intention in an action is wholesome or unwholesome that determines the weight, in the Buddha's view, of that experience, of that action.

So mindfulness is constantly cutting through our karmic formations. And that's why Nagarjuna went on to say, "Karma is not abandoned by letting go, but by meditation." So we don't just decide, "I'm going to let go of this volitional pattern. I'm going to get rid of this karmic pattern and formation." It doesn't work that way. Karma is abandoned by seeing it clearly in meditation and not buying into it. This is the way.

Now, mindfulness practice will go there, but I want to suggest another meditation that lends itself, I think, really well for this stage of the unfolding and emptiness. One has seen through the reality of self. One has seen the insubstantiality of sense appearances. One doesn't want to go on clinging, and yet the habits still keep arising. So let's explore a meditation that the Buddha might call "abiding in emptiness." This is based on a discourse in the Majjhima Nikaya, number 121, the lesser discourse on emptiness. Let's see how it fits and if it's something that appeals to you.

So again, please take a comfortable meditation posture. We'll just do this for about ten minutes, and then this will be the last part of the evening before we open up to discussion, questions, comments.

So again, please sit comfortably. Be relaxed and upright. Let your eyes gently close.

Once again, feel the body in sitting. Notice that the body is really filled with awareness. Wherever you turn your attention, you can find yourself in the body—from the top of the head, through the abdomen, into the sitting base and legs. Awareness can move to any of those points that you choose and notice what's there.

For one thing, we notice that there's a distance, a felt sense of distance between the top of the head and the feet. The body is a physical object located in space, and we can feel a gap, a space between the top of the head and the feet. So we feel the sense of space within the body. We can also feel a distance between the right arm and the left arm—another sense of space.

As we let the attention move through the whole body, we see the whole body is located in space and that there's distance between all the different parts of it. We can feel that this is not imaginary. This is the felt sense of the body.

Now, as you explore this distance within the body from the top to bottom, from right to left, is the whole of the outline of the body jammed full of sensations? Or are there areas in the body where no sensations are apparent or felt? Is every cubic millimeter of the body chock full of sensation? Or do you actually find space within the body? We might say between the sensations, even within the sensations. Can you notice some empty space within the body?

So you have a sense of the space within the body. And now, can you also get a sense of the space around the body? Perhaps where your skin is exposed, you feel the coolness of the air or the warmth of the air. Air around the body, space around the body.

If you'd like, you can open your eyes momentarily, take in the space in the room, and then close your eyes again and see if that sense of space stays a little bit—space around the body.

So there's space within the body and space around the body. Are these two really different spaces, or is there one space that you can feel holding the body, containing the body, as well as within the body?

Can you get a sense of that one space that you feel both inside and beyond the body? Let yourself notice now that space, that one space. Bring your attention to it and investigate a little bit.

Does that space have an edge or a boundary? Or does it feel like it might go on and on? Well, if you're in a room, you might feel, "Oh, it stops at the wall." But if you were to open a window, then you might well have a sense, "Oh, that space keeps going on." Or a door—"Oh, that space keeps going on."

If a door or window was open, would it really affect your felt sense of that space? Could it be that your felt sense of space really doesn't have an edge or a boundary? Could we say that you may be able to perceive a space that is boundless?

In any case, I invite you to put your attention on that perception of space, however wide it seems to you, and make that the focus for your mindfulness. Let your focus be on that space for the remainder of this sitting—the last couple of minutes. And then notice: how does it feel to have the attention on that perception of space? What is that like for you as a meditation focus?

That was the meditation bell signaling the end of that guided meditation. I just want to say that this is adapted from that discourse, Majjhima 121 that I mentioned—the lesser discourse on emptiness that the Buddha gave.

I find this perception of space a very helpful focus because when I focus on the whole body, that can be very pleasant. But the body still has painful aspects and pleasurable aspects, which can easily lead to being involved in liking and disliking. When I move the attention to space, it doesn't have those pleasurable and painful aspects. And so I find that the mind is able to rest the attention there with greater equanimity. And yet there is a clear focus for the attention to land on.

One more wrinkle, which we don't have time to go into tonight: you can inquire what is knowing that space and then put your attention on the knowing element. This offers some of the same beauty as the meditation on space, but that's for another exploration.

That's really what I wanted to cover in the talk and the meditation this evening. Thank you for listening.

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