

Practicing Emptiness, Experiencing Fullness
An Interview with Guy Armstrong

The world is empty because it is empty of self or of what belongs to self.

-- The Buddha

Guy Armstrong was introduced to the Buddha's teachings in 1974. Since then, he has trained as a Buddhist monk with meditation masters in Thailand and Burma. He began teaching the dharma over twenty years ago, and is currently a member of the IMS Guiding Teacher Council. With an abiding interest in the depth and implications of *suññatā*, or emptiness, he offers us insights into this essential Buddhist teaching.

Guy, the teachings on 'emptiness' can be difficult for many of us in the West to grasp. What did the Buddha mean by this term?

People frequently imagine 'emptiness' as blankness, where nothing happens in the mind, where there's just a big vacancy. That's not what the Buddha was pointing to with this term.

As we practice, we start to come in contact with emptiness in different ways. Yogis – those on retreat - often report three experiences that indicate a growing understanding of emptiness: spaciousness, absence of a tangible self, and insubstantiality. You might say that as the truth of emptiness dawns, the *fullness* of life comes into awareness.

Can you describe each of these?

When we begin to meditate, we may feel that thoughts are occurring all the time. After a while, as our bodies and minds settle, we become aware of small spaces between our thoughts and emotions. As we continue to practice, these gaps can expand until we have a sense of the vastness of our own minds, of our own consciousness. This vastness then

becomes a large container for everything that passes through the mind. It also lends increasing calm to the practice and to our lives.

The second important element is that of 'not self.' This aspect is at first unusual and can take a few years for a meditator to fully understand.

If we reflect on our lives, we notice the tendency to place an overlay of 'I' or 'mine' on all our experiences of the world. Whenever we hear something, or see something, or think something, it is in terms of ownership. Yet as we closely examine reality, as the mind gets quiet, we start to realize for ourselves that there is no evidence for this 'I' or 'mine.' As the Buddha said, "In the seen, there is just what is seen; in the heard, there is just what is heard."

Sometimes there can be so much silence, so much spaciousness in a moment that we can actually feel a little adrift. The 'I' has become so weak that we're not quite sure we're still here. Sometimes anxiety or unsettledness can arise at this point; but it's a good sign that the usual assumptions of self have shifted.

The third aspect of emptiness is the quality of reality as being insubstantial and not solid. Usually, the initial place we can see this is in relation to our own body. When we first meditate, we feel the body is really dense, like a rock or a piece of wood. But as we investigate further and look directly at the experience of bodily sensation, we find there's nothing hard or fixed in the body at all. Rather, wherever we turn our attention, sensations have the nature of vibration, pulsation, impermanence, shifting, changing, rising, falling. The Buddha pointed to this in a teaching in the *Samyutta Nikāya* (the Connected Discourses) called 'The Mass of Foam.'

He said, "If you see a mass of foam floating on the surface of a river and you look at it closely you'll see it's void, hollow and insubstantial. In the same way, if you examine the whole world of matter, you'll see that it's also void, hollow and insubstantial, just like this mass of foam."

As the understanding of insubstantiality grows, the world can seem softer, less fixed, and not something that we so easily grasp onto.

Does the concept of insubstantiality apply to our emotions as well as our physical senses?

Absolutely. When meditators start to see their emotions in terms of the three characteristics – that they are always changing, that they're unsatisfactory because none of them ultimately last, and that there's not an owner of any feeling - then they can view emotions as passing clouds. As clouds move across the sky, they coalesce, they persist for a while, and then they break up. We realize that emotions are formed in exactly the same way. This is the realization of the emptiness of emotions, which can unhook us from taking them quite so seriously. We let them arise, form and pass away within the spaciousness of understanding. This is one of the biggest areas of freedom for meditators.

When the Buddha speaks of 'empty of self', doesn't that imply nihilism?

Well, the Buddha was actually accused in his lifetime of being nihilistic. One time he replied to that question by saying, "I don't teach the annihilation of an existing being." While this is absolutely right, it is also a bit cryptic and invites reflection. It's important to understand that, with insight, what goes out of our experience is a false and limiting sense of who we are that confines and constricts our full functioning. Many yogis say that when the false sense of self goes, even temporarily, a weight is lifted off their shoulders. So the experience isn't one of nihilism, but one of relief, greater happiness and ease.

Every meeting with every person is experienced more fully. Every time we hear a bird's song it's experienced more directly. Every taste of food comes across more clearly. As the Zen master Dogen put it, "To study the way is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to be enlightened by all things."

Can you offer some techniques that help cultivate a deeper understanding of emptiness?

Let's talk about the absence of self, because in some ways it's the most subtle of the three aspects I mentioned earlier. The direct way to seeing the emptiness of self is the practice of mindfulness as described in the *Satipatthāna Sutta* – the Four Foundations of Mindfulness. It leads naturally into an understanding of not-self, but there is a particular addition that can help to cultivate this understanding.

In doing our usual mindfulness practice, we might note "hearing," "seeing," "in" for an in-breath, "sensing," "thinking," and so on for the various arisings at the sense doors. Every time we make a note like that, we might try adding the comment, "Not I, not mine." Practicing like this, over and over, inclines the mind to see things the way they actually are, and to cease the extra habit of claiming experience as self or belonging to self.

At the time of the Buddha, were these teachings on emptiness unusual?

They were very original. The existing religious world view most in favor 2,500 years ago in India was an early form of Hinduism which posited that the work of the spiritual path was to unite the *atman*, or individual self, with the *brahman*, or universal self. The actual existence of the individual self was never questioned. The Buddha's presentations of the teachings of 'not self' were very radical in his day, and unsettling to many at the time, just as they are radical and can be unsettling today.

Since the teachings on emptiness are about the very nature of the human heart and mind, they're just as true today as they were in the time of the Buddha; they are the doorways to liberation. The entire path of awakening can be seen as the unfolding of emptiness.

What are the qualities of a mind that abides in emptiness?

Abiding in emptiness is a very purifying practice. It's really at the heart of our meditation because it combines right understanding with right mindfulness and right concentration. The more we practice abiding in emptiness the more we experience awakened qualities of

heart and mind - peace, contentment, joy, lovingkindness and wisdom. You could say these are the fruits of emptiness.

How has this aspect of the teachings inspired your own practice?

Emptiness has been a frequent theme for my own reflection and study. On a study retreat in my home a few years ago, I read about emptiness every day. The concept began to really sink into my bones. One night I dreamed that I was standing in front of a full-length mirror, looking at my reflection. I asked my reflection, "Why is emptiness important?" The reflection answered, "Because it means that you don't exist." At that point I woke up, because it was quite startling. I appreciated the answer, though, because it came out of the mirror and not out of my own mouth.

It also pointed to the way of liberation. When the sense of a separate self goes, the very difficulties of life also dissolve. The mirror's reply doesn't mean that I literally die. Rather it reminds me of a comment from an old Sri Lankan monk who was asked the secret of his great happiness and joy. The monk replied, "No self, no problem."