GUY ARMSTRONG • DAIJAKU KINST • ARI GOLDFIELD

Exploring Emptiness

The teachings on *shunyata*, or emptiness, are a cornerstone of Buddhism. Our panel discusses what emptiness is, what it isn't, and why it ultimately points to an experience that is dynamic, intimate, and workable.

SCULPTURES | **SHI ZHONGYING**

BUDDHADHARMA: Let's begin by exploring how shunyata is defined in different traditions. Guy, how is it described in the early teachings of the Buddha?

GUY ARMSTRONG: There are two main meanings of emptiness in the early teachings. The first is being empty of self. Ananda asked the Buddha, "What does it mean when you say 'Empty is the world'?" The Buddha replied, "It's because the world is empty of self and of what belongs to a self that it's said, empty is the world." So the first meaning is not-self, or *anatta*. The second is an approach to meditation that the Buddha called "abiding in emptiness." The Buddha's instruction was not to add anything to present-moment experience but to regard it as empty of what is not there. The Buddha also talked about phenomena being empty of substantiality. Although the term *shunyata* doesn't get used in this context, he describes the five aggregates as being void, hollow, and insubstantial.

BUDDHADHARMA: Daijaku, how does Zen build on the view of shunyata put forth in the early teachings of the Buddha?

DAIJAKU KINST: Soto Zen teachings emphasize both the particularity and the insubstantiality of phenomena. It is presented as a kind of dynamic activity. For example, Dogen, in his fascicle *Zenki*, compares life to a boat sailing on the sea. All the activities of sailing—the boat, the sea, the wind, those working the rudder and sail and pole—make the moment of sailing/boat/person/sea. When we realize that we are this dynamic activity, all of it, in our ordinary day-to-day lives as well as in zazen, there is liberation and compassion. There's a lot made about differences between schools, and there are differences, but here I think it's more a matter of emphasis.

BUDDHADHARMA: Ari, what is a Vajrayana framework for understanding shunyata?

ARI GOLDFIELD: There's an emphasis in the Tibetan tradition on connecting with emptiness in relation to our experience. We tend to experience our world as filled with situations, people, and feelings that seem to have a solid existence that's hard to work with; from that, we feel averse to our experience and suffering arises. So the first level of the emptiness teachings is to see that things are empty of objective existence, even as they exist in relationship with us as the experiencer. And because things don't have any fixed, immovable existence, we can discover a sense of fluidity and workability in how we relate to them, and we can experience emptiness as less and less separation between ourselves and the energy of our experience.

BUDDHADHARMA: We're all using "emptiness" as a translation of shunyata. How do you feel about that translation?

DAIJAKU KINST: I think the translation of shunyata as

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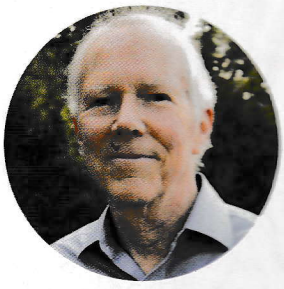
emptiness is problematic. The reason is that it is so easily misunderstood, particularly by educated Westerners who tend to think of emptiness in terms of its existential meanings. And for those who have experienced trauma, it's very easy to say, "Oh, I know what emptiness is, it's that hollowness at the base of my emotional being," when in truth, emptiness liberates us from despair and nihilism. I don't know what the alternative would be, but when I'm teaching, I ask students not to stop with "empty" but to use a complete phrase such as "empty of inherent existence" until they get a feel for what it actually means, which is dependent co-arising.

ARI GOLDFIELD: I do think emptiness is an accurate translation. And it's also problematic. But I think the word always has been problematic in the tradition itself. It's a word that hits us very powerfully. The word itself serves as a catalyst. It's hard to fall asleep with that word; we have a reaction to it. It's a charged word, but I think the difficulties around it have existed from when the Buddha first used it—there are even stories of practitioners who couldn't take it, who had heart attacks and died. There is a real power there; we have to be very careful with it. So it's important to ask: empty of what? Our experience is empty of being unworkable, for example. And to me, the last part of emptiness—that "ness"—seems to add the element of experience. That "ness" can actually take us into an experience of expansiveness, of openness, of acceptance and love.

BUDDHADHARMA: We're hearing an interesting distinction here between speaking of "things being empty" and speaking of something called "emptiness." Guy, what do you make of this?

GUY ARMSTRONG: "Empty" and "emptiness" are literal translations from the word *shunya*, or the Pali *sunya*, which at the time of the Buddha meant "empty" in a very common, ordinary sense. When the Buddha said, "Go meditate in these empty huts," the word he used was *sunya*. I think emptiness as the central philosophical position of a major religion is provocative and encourages some reflection; I suspect that was part of the Buddha's intention when he used it. So I favor that simple translation. But we need to draw out the full meaning of its implications, because it's not about nihilism or cynicism or complete absence. Instead, it refers to a very great presence in which oneself and the objects of sense experience are seen to be insubstantial.



(LEFT—RIGHT): SANDRA MELLO; CLAUDINE GOSSETT; SALLY ARMSTRONG; AL

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Seeing that insubstantiality is freeing; it opens the heart to love, compassion, and wisdom.

In terms of the properties of the noun or adjectival forms, that's an interesting question. In some ways, I think we'd be better served by just using the adjective "empty," because with "emptiness," Westerners tend to get the idea that there's something concrete that we're supposed to discover. The real meaning is that the things we experience are empty of substantiality or empty of self.

ARI GOLDFIELD: When my teacher came to the West in the seventies, the first aspect of emptiness he taught was not self-emptiness but the emptiness of other, which refers to the nature of mind—of buddhanature and how it is empty of any flaw or problem. Buddhanature, the core of our being, is not empty of its own amazing qualities, of strength, love, and wisdom. There's a real positive sense of it. The trick is not to reify those concepts, and that's why they're described as non-composite or non-oppositional. So strength, for example, is not the opposite of weakness—it's the strength that can hold experiences of both strength and weakness. Love can hold experiences of love and anger. From that perspective, nothing in our experience has the power to harm or denigrate who we truly are. Ultimately, our nature is empty of any vulnerability.

BUDDHADHARMA: Guy, coming from the Theravada tradition, how do you respond when you hear language about buddhanature and the core of one's being?

GUY ARMSTRONG: This is a question that's gone on within Buddhism for about 2,000 years. Some schools have been comfortable with that language since it was first brought into Buddhism, which as I understand was in the era of the Yogacara school, around 300 CE. You find echoes of it in Zen and even in some Thai Forest lineages, for instance in the writings of Ajahn Chah, Ajahn Maha Boowa, and Ajahn Jumnien. But there are other schools, within Theravada certainly, and possibly the Madhyamaka school in Tibetan Buddhism, that aren't as comfortable with the concept. They basically say experience is made up of the five aggregates or the six senses and nothing else except the unconditioned, which waits to be revealed at the moment of enlightenment. So that tension has existed for a long time. But people have gotten enlightened by following Yogacara teachings and also by following traditional Theravada or Madhyamaka teachings. I think it's up to individual practitioners to listen to both presentations of the buddhadharma and follow whichever is most resonant for them.

DAIJAKU KINST: Buddhanature is an important teaching in Soto Zen. It's crucial that people "fall down and get up" in exploring its meaning—to reify it and then be challenged in that reification, and try to understand it as the interdependent nature of all being. This dynamic interdependence is sometimes called suchness or thusness. The question is not whether something exists but *how* things exist, not resting on some reified notion of buddhanature for the answers to our questions about the nature of reality and liberation but actually living out moment by moment the dynamic activity of buddhanature or suchness in all the activities of our days.

BUDDHADHARMA: Let's talk further about the relationship between appearance, or form, and emptiness? How do we reconcile these?

ARI GOLDFIELD: These teachings get so abstract. But we can just start with our own experience. What is form? There's a sense of something feeling solid, of having a fixed existence, which in some ways is comforting in that we feel we can rely on certain aspects of our experience. The goal is not to take that away completely but rather to open to how those qualities manifest for us through our personal history, psychology, thoughts, and culture. On a societal level, for example, we can see this happening with how gender is being revealed more and more as a construct rather than as a fixed form.

There's an instruction by a Tibetan yogi named Gotsangpa who said, "Whatever is difficult, make that the object of your meditation." By taking something difficult and changing our relationship to it, we can start to see how the form feels more flexible, more open. When I say "form," I'm really

The question is not whether something exists but how things exist. —Daijaku Kinst

talking about whatever is appearing. When we start to experience a sense of relaxation and openness, that's the emptiness of it. The flip side of the equation, "emptiness is form," is difficult to understand, but we can start to see how from emptiness—meaning openness and energy—things manifest. That's emptiness manifesting as appearance. It's our own being, our awareness manifesting as something that's part of our experience so we can come into relationship with it. We don't have to fear it.

DAIJAKU KINST: There's a spirit of generosity and gratitude in becoming intimate with form-emptiness by doing the practice and bringing oneself fully to the moment. This whole great earth arising, each blade of grass, each person—each form is the dynamic activity of the Buddha. It's important to come back to experience and allow that intimacy of realization to happen within the practice. Concepts are helpful guides—to a point. When we engage in the practice, we realize how form and emptiness are already reconciled.

BUDDHADHARMA: Guy, how does the Theravada work with this relationship between appearance and emptiness?

GUY ARMSTRONG: I think the basic understanding is very similar to the Tibetan—the key is looking directly at the nature of our own experience, the senses and sense objects. Through meditation we examine the direct experience of sensations and the body—sights, sounds, smells, taste, touch—and objects of mind like thoughts and emotions, all of which are included in the five aggregates. We see their insubstantial nature and that they're coming and going so quickly that there's not really an object there that we can hold on to in the first place. Learning to see the emptiness of appearances teaches us not to grasp at changing phenomena.

When we study emptiness of self, we see that when the sense of "I" arises, that's when we've taken hold of something. So we start to recognize that the sense of self arises when we take hold of some aspect of our experience; we discover, "Oh! Maybe if I don't take hold of anything, the sense of self doesn't have to come up." We see how the sense of self causes disturbance and the absence of self brings calm and ease. Then, as we explore the insubstantial nature of sense experience, we see there's nothing to grasp in the first place, which further encourages us to abide without taking hold of anything in our experience. That's what leads to freedom—the openness of heart and dawning of wisdom.

ARI GOLDFIELD: When we feel intimate with our experience, we're experiencing emptiness. It's not a light-switch moment, something that we get all of a sudden, but rather a process that unfolds in the feeling of intimacy and closeness when we're not grasping or fixating, when we're just allowing ourselves and our experience to manifest with a sense of joy and wonder. Even when our experience is painful, we still can connect with love, with "This is my experience, my uniqueness" and feel a sense of wonder about it. That, to me, is the beginning of experiencing emptiness.

BUDDHADHARMA: In some traditions, we hear about the union of wisdom and emptiness. Could you say something about that relationship?

ARI GOLDFIELD: Essentially, wisdom is that we don't throw away any part of our experience. Whatever it is, there's something that can be nourishing, that can help our progress on the path. So we try to stay open to whatever our experience is and what meaning it might have for us. The nature of confusion, too, is wisdom—the emptiness teachings allow us to stand in our experience and be a bit less fearful of it; we have a little less need to push it away. Because we have the sense that there's nothing that can ultimately do us harm, we can be with it and have a chance to discover its wisdom.

GUY ARMSTRONG: I sometimes like to think about emptiness as a meditative state, not necessarily in terms of formal meditation but as a place of

openness where we're not so caught up in the concerns of self. Resting in the spaciousness of heart and mind, abiding in emptiness, naturally opens the doors to a lot of beautiful qualities, including wisdom and compassion. When the veils of klesha are not constructing the self and obscuring, wisdom and compassion naturally shine forth.

DAIJAKU KINST: Seeing and accepting reality as it is—that everything is empty of inherent existence—is wisdom. Committing oneself to seeing clearly is committing oneself to a world that is both alive with particularity and empty of inherent existence. Such a commitment supports and allows wisdom to manifest; it is the path of the bodhisattva. From there, we can begin to taste the liberation that comes from that, but it can be a scary proposition.

BUDDHADHARMA: You stated earlier that emptiness is dependent co-arising. Is it that straightforward? Are they two ways of saying the same thing?

DAIJAKU KINST: That's how I understand it. When Dogen speaks of the boat and the people riding in it, he's talking about dynamic activity as dependent co-arising. This moment-by-moment intimate arising that includes us, our delusions, even our crankiness—they're all a part of it. As Dogen says, nothing is hidden. Nothing is excluded; there is no other self besides this moment. We are this dynamic activity, and emptiness is not apart from dependent co-arising.

GUY ARMSTRONG: I agree that they're almost synonymous. The Buddha said, "When this arises, that arises; when this does not arise, that does not arise." This points both to the constructed nature of everything that rests on prior causes and conditions and also to the impermanent nature of things, because when the cause goes away, the effect goes away, too. It points to the insubstantial nature of all conditioned things: they arise based on causes and conditions and also have the nature of passing. As I see it, that's at the heart of what emptiness means.

BUDDHADHARMA: How does one cultivate an understanding or experience of shunyata? What skillful means or practices are emphasized in each of your traditions?

GUY ARMSTRONG: There are two fundamental ways we think of it: emptiness of self and emptiness of phenomena. In the Theravada lineages I've practiced in, there are usually dharma talks in a given practice period that emphasize the absence of self, but many of them are really theoretical; people don't have an easy way to connect them to their experience. I've found that one of the most accessible ways for people to get in touch with these teachings is if they're asked to notice when the sense of self is strong and what that experience is like, and when the sense of self is weak and what that experience is like. They commonly report that when the sense of self is strong, they feel agitated, there's some disturbance going on, and when the sense of self is weak, they tend to report a sense of calm or ease. This gets them to understand that the sense of self is often born out of klesha and is not a constant.

Once they've started to undermine that belief in a stable, ongoing self, they can start investigating how the sense of self gets formed through some simple experiential steps from dependent origination: contact leads to feeling, feeling leads to craving, and craving leads to clinging. Understanding how the sense of self is formed from clinging or grasping leads to an awareness that sometimes there isn't much sense of self, which could mean there isn't an ongoing self.

Once they get more deeply relaxed and the mind settles—as they become intimate with their investigation of the six senses, with clear mindfulness of objects arising and passing—they start to see that

nothing lasts. Body sensations are the easiest place for that realization to start. Although the body seems really solid, nothing in the self-experience of the body lasts more than a moment. From there it becomes easier to understand the emptiness of all phenomena through their momentary arising and passing.

BUDDHADHARMA: Daijaku, how does Zen practice lead someone to see the truth of emptiness?

DAIJAKU KINST: Zazen is the root practice. Sitting and attending to this moment as a complete manifestation of ultimate reality is challenging and makes apparent what's happening in one's body, heart, and mind, as well as one's surroundings. We strive to be intimate and fully present with how we construct reality, with what comes and goes. Other aspects of training, which can easily be applied to lay practice, are work, relationship, and community life. For example, it's important to treat objects with attentiveness and care. Classically, discussion of work practice has focused on the kitchen, getting into details such as attention to whether we drop a knife on the counter or we set it down. But it's also noticing that how we relate to things extends to working with other human beings. It's noticing one's impact in community, how the self is always in relation to others. Those concrete, ordinary experiences are powerful teachers of emptiness.

BUDDHADHARMA: Could you say a bit more about work practice and how we engage with objects?

DAIJAKU KINST: In the *Tenzo Kyokun*, Dogen says to treat even a leaf of green as the Buddha. To separate oneself from objects as if there is a difference between self and other is to ignore the dynamic activity of the moment, which is inclusive of everything. When we don't separate, we are taught by the things of our life. With something as simple as moving in a kitchen, there are other bodies to navigate around, plus knives, food, water—all teaching us constantly. Bringing an attentive, devoted mind to our circumstances allows those things to transform our experience of self and other.

It can be easy to get a fixed idea about somebody. Seeing the other person's emptiness helps us not form a fixed view about them. —Guy Armstrong

BUDDHADHARMA: Ari, how does one cultivate an experience of emptiness in the Tibetan tradition?

ARI GOLDFIELD: One important element that Tibetan Buddhism emphasizes is the longing to know who we actually are. If we can follow that longing, it allows us to feel into a deeper relationship with ourselves. Here we discover the same paradox we find in an intimate relationship: there is a longing to know the other and to be close, but the closer we get, the more mysterious the other becomes. If we can direct that longing inward, gradually we appreciate the miraculousness of our consciousness, which is ungraspable. Then we can bring that longing and wonder into relationships and see them as a support for us to further grow.

BUDDHADHARMA: What are some of the traditional practices that might support that process?

ARI GOLDFIELD: What we all share is the sitting practice, which gives us the chance to be in relationship with ourselves as individuals. When we're sitting on the cushion, we don't have to do other things. We can just be aware of what's going on internally. The Mahamudra practice in Tibetan Buddhism, for example, is about opening to the energy of emotions, sensations, and thoughts, and to the energetic

level beneath projecting names and judgments, connecting with what's known as the subtle body, which is where our consciousness and physical body meet in the energy of experience. So we have that aspect of formal sitting, and then, as Milarepa said, "Going, wandering, sleeping, resting, I look at mind. This is virtuous practice without sessions or breaks." It's important to understand that meditation is not limited to the cushion. Bringing the openness of those glimpses we experience on the cushion into our daily life is the practice of skillful method. It also includes singing, dancing, prayer, work, or whatever else we're doing. The key is to be open to how, in this moment, we can be mindful and open to something beyond our own fixed notions of what we think any given situation is.

BUDDHADHARMA: What can the experience of emptiness be compared to? What might an analogy be?

DAIJAKU KINST: Analogies are going to fall flat here. We can use embodied descriptions, perhaps. If you describe to somebody else the taste of an orange and they have never tasted an orange, you might be able to approximate it, but tasting the orange oneself is really the only way to know. When we talk about analogies, we're talking about helping people get in the general vicinity so they may be encouraged to actually taste the truth of the Tathagata's words themselves. I say, just do it, do the practice. The problem with analogies is it's so easy for people to come up with ideas and say, well, I've got it.

ARI GOLDFIELD: I like the analogy of tasting chocolate. I really love the experience of tasting good chocolate! The experience includes our sense of body and well-being as well as the ineffability of it. Life can be so precarious, and yet we have these opportunities to ground ourselves and open to the wonder of experience in even the smallest things.

BUDDHADHARMA: Your teacher, Khenpo Tsultrim Gyamtso, teaches on the dreamlike nature of reality. And emptiness is sometimes compared to the experience of a dream. Does that resonate for you?

ARI GOLDFIELD: The danger of the dream analogy is misunderstanding or misusing it to denigrate, demean, or push away our experience. That's a danger of nihilism, pushing something away because we say it's empty, a dream, or an illusion. The point of the dream analogy is that there's a magical, wondrous quality to life, as when we know we're dreaming and there's a sense that anything can happen. Things might look good, they might look bad; it might be a good dream, it might be a nightmare, but dreams have a multiplicity of possible meanings. We might have a dream that really scares us, but then we reflect on it and have a completely different relationship with it. We might find a message in it. When we relate to our life in that way, ultimately there's nothing to fear. We can open to it and be enthusiastic about it.

GUY ARMSTRONG: We Theravadans tend to be a little more prosaic, so I'll just offer some words from people who have described their meditation experience to me. The most common descriptions I hear are: relaxed, open, spacious, still, restful, grounded, free. Once we have experienced emptiness, it gives us an indication of the direction of the path, which is really to relax, trust, and let go. John Lennon said, "There's nothing to get hung about"—that kind of sums it up.

BUDDHADHARMA: Beyond formal practice, how does an understanding of shunyata inform our everyday lives? For example, how might it impact being married or relating to friends?

DAIJAKU KINST: One of the central elements of experiencing emptiness is unseating the self as the center of the universe—and, in fact, unseating humanity from the center of the universe. It's having a proper relationship with reality. That's the diminishment of, or at least a momentary dissolution of, self-centeredness. If we can root ourselves in the experience of emptiness, then self-centeredness and clawing ambition diminish. We can allow others to be themselves, knowing that ultimately there's no difference between us and all reality. This is particularly important as we address the toxic delusions that underlie the injustices associated with race, gender, sex, and other dimensions of our humanity that are so prevalent in our society.

The teachings of emptiness teach us to respect and value the uniqueness and particularity, to understand the otherness of another as well as how profoundly interrelated we are. The more we align with ourselves, the less we create problems for ourselves and others and can be awakened by all the dimensions of our life instead of seeing them as obstacles.

ARI GOLDFIELD: In the past, I have fallen into the danger of thinking that emptiness is a tool—that there's a specific situation or emotion I'm going to meditate on as empty and that's somehow going to do something to fix it. But over the years, I've opened to a sense of emptiness just being atmospheric, like the air that I breathe. If I can feel my own relationship in that atmosphere, then with my wife, for example, I feel safer being with her as she is; I don't have to move into defensiveness or a polarity of "I'm this and you're that." I try to interact with openness to things as they are, willing to work on any difficulties without feeling threatened.

GUY ARMSTRONG: As we develop an awareness of emptiness, our sense of self or ego gets thinner, which leads to less obstruction in our relationships. Chuang-Tzu wrote, "If you empty your boat crossing the river of life, no one will harm you. No one will oppose you." In marriage, specifically, what I notice is that once I understand that nothing is fixed in my emotions or thoughts, I also understand nothing is fixed in my wife's emotions or thoughts, so I can't categorize or pigeonhole her as being one particular way. In long-term relationships, it can be easy to get a fixed idea about somebody. Seeing the other person's emptiness helps us not form a fixed view about them.

BUDDHADHARMA: What are some of the obstacles to cultivating emptiness?

GUY ARMSTRONG: I think the most obvious are the long-conditioned mental habits around constructing the sense of self and seeing the world as solid. That's where we've put our hope and faith for many, many years, if not many lifetimes, and those habit energies are not easy to undo. Once we embark on a meditative path and start to commit to seeing into the main obstacle of habit energies, a lot of different obstacles arise. First, there's the encounter with our difficult emotions and tendencies, which are painful to feel and humbling to see. But if we have enough encouragement, we find they're all workable—every kind of emotion or thought pattern is workable. As we make strides in accepting them, we open into a greater sense of space, which we can call abiding in emptiness or touching the experience of emptiness.

That can be a little destabilizing, though, because the ground we've built our whole worldview on, the "I," comes into question. At that point there can be a real sense of insecurity, anxiety, or fear about where we go next. I'm not just talking about an abstract intellectual fear, but a visceral gut sense of the carpet having been pulled out from under our feet. For these two phases of learning—working with difficult emotions and working with the anxiety of uncovering the absence of self—it's very helpful to talk with a teacher or dharma friend, someone who's walked the path before and learned to be content and open in the face of those challenges. At certain points on the journey, having contact with a dharma friend is really essential.

DAIJAKU KINST: I think the first obstacle is misunderstanding what the teaching is—we need to clear up any confusion we have. Another real stumbling block is the belief that we have to have some particular experience. It's easy to get caught up in that belief, but in fact, the practice is alive whether we know it or not.

Perhaps the most potent obstacle is fear. I was struck years ago when I read Jeffrey Hopkins' discussion of the anxiety that comes from encountering teachings of emptiness. He observed that you can get so scared that you just get off your cushion and walk around and turn on the television set.

These teachings get at the root of who we think we are. That's what they're meant to do: unseat the clinging self. So struggle is normal. For those people who have had experiences of trauma or of great deprivation, or other similar experiences, this can be very difficult. Even attending to the breath can be difficult, and having a kind of heroic pioneer

mentality—feeling like we have to go it alone with a harsh, judging, and aggressive mind—makes dealing with feelings of being alone and afraid that much worse. So sangha, the presence of teachers and spiritual friends who can help undo the obstacles, is extremely important.

ARI GOLDFIELD: I would say, if you're feeling stuck in your exploration of emptiness or you find it difficult, good for you. There's nothing wrong with you. You're in the right place. You're just where you should be, and wherever that place feels hard and difficult, give yourself love right in that space. That loving relationship toward ourselves is so important with these teachings. There's a story of Trungpa Rinpoche going to his teacher, Shechen Kongtrul, when he was young and doubting himself and saying, "I'm not really a tulku, you know. There's been a mistake. I just don't get it." His teacher replied, "Don't you know that I love you?" Coming back to that love and appreciation of ourselves, hopefully in a community of practitioners along with our spiritual guide, is the warmth that melts whatever sense of isolation or stuckness we might be experiencing.

BUDDHADHARMA: What have these teachings meant to you personally? How have they impacted your life?

ARI GOLDFIELD: Hearing this question brings tears to my eyes. It brings up memories of the time I spent with my own teacher, that deep sense of love. Emptiness is that place where we don't feel separated, where we don't feel barriers within ourselves or between ourselves and others. It's joy and brokenheartedness all at the same time, and that's just right.

GUY ARMSTRONG: My first response is that they have brought a much greater sense of freedom to my heart and mind. I experience greater ease in being in the world, being with my own inner experience, and being with others. I think it's important to create and sustain this sense of connection. It's easy to think meditation on emptiness could take one in the direction of nihilism, to a cold and vacant place, but it's important to note that in the traditions we're all coming from, there's a constant emphasis on bringing forth heart qualities. In the Insight tradition, that's done through the formal practice of loving-kindness, from the beginning of one's practice all the way through. I think this is important for practitioners to think about. We have a saying in our tradition that insight reveals emptiness and loving-kindness fills it with warmth. So as we open up this great space, loving-kindness or compassion that has been developed all along is already there and fills the space, connects us to others, and makes life very rich.

Emptiness is that place where we don't feel barriers. It's joy and brokenheartedness all at the same time, and that's just right. —Ari Goldfield

DAIJAKU KINST: I don't separate these teachings from the whole lineage that I've received from my teachers—they're so central. I feel great gratitude for the opportunity to live a life of vow dedicated to the practice of the Way. If I were going to characterize it, I would say emptiness is a fierce and loving teacher, one that is demanding and also gives everything that's needed in every moment. My vow is to have the teachings of emptiness and the Soto Zen way guide everything I do—my interactions with my wife, with my students, all those I encounter in my day from getting up in the morning to going to bed at night. What can we have but gratitude for such a loving teacher? BD