

Kurt Spellmeyer

*Meditating with Emptiness*

Week Four: “Before and After Awakening: Creating the Pure Land”

March 26, 2022



Hello, this is the fourth and final installment of our four-week series, “Meditating on Emptiness.” I’m very glad that you’ve made it this far, and I hope you will continue to practice the kind of meditation that I’ve been describing here over these last few weeks. I have been using the metaphor of two screens, and I use this metaphor fairly commonly in my own teaching of Zen because it’s so resonant. It makes so much sense. We have a screen in front of our eyes, we see the world, and then at the same time, there is, or there seems to be, this interior screen behind our eyes, which is projecting images, memories, and so on, and these two screens seem to be operating simultaneously much of the time. When we sit down on the cushion, close our eyes, and limit the input, we begin to realize that the screen behind our eyes is full of thoughts, memories, and so on. And as we’re watching the breath or we’re working with emptiness, that screen begins to clear up, and at some point, you look at the screen behind your eyes, and you see nothing. It’s blank and dark. Then you open your eyes, and then there is this wonderful experience of connectedness with everything around us. It’s as though a veil has been removed from our perception. It’s as though when you take away the obstructions behind the eyes, the boundary between yourself and the world drops away, and you’re able to connect.

All of these transformations in our consciousness are quite predictable, and when I use this model, people generally find it very helpful. I hope you’ve found it helpful here, and I hope it continues to be useful to you. But I have to make a confession at this point that even though what I’ve described feels real and compelling, there aren’t actually two screens. They don’t exist. You could say there’s really only one screen. We experience things as though there were two screens because we have created this illusion of a separate self. Relatively speaking, there are two screens, but in an absolute sense, there’s just one mind. There’s not a mind called Kurt and another mind, Buddha mind, behind my eyes. It will feel that way for a long time. But that’s not the reality. You could say that that’s a product of the way we have constructed our own consciousness, our own individualized identity, and created the fiction of a self or the fiction of a consciousness that’s centered somewhere apart from the mind itself or from the real mind itself.

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Initially, the work of meditation practice is clearing away the obstacles that have accumulated in the storehouse consciousness. As we sit down on the cushion, we're focusing on our breath and entering emptiness. Things come up on the screen behind our eyes, and we work them through, as I described last time. You may be working with a koan, or you may just be working with a life event. It triggers all of these conditioned responses, and you keep going into emptiness. After a while, it no longer triggers those responses and you realize, “This is just what happened, and it happened, and now I'm filled with compassion.” And we go through that process over and over again. It can take a long time. You may be cleaning the rest of your life. In Zen, we have a metaphor about cleaning. We're always cleaning. We're always cleaning the bathroom, we're always cleaning the Zendo floor, but we're also always cleaning the mind like the screen behind the eyes. This work of cleaning the screen behind the eyes might be a lifetime of work.

But something might happen to you at some point in your practice. There are no guarantees, but it may happen. If you keep cleaning the screen behind your eyes and you practice diligently, what can happen is that one day, the screen is so clean that you experience the screen in a different way. Ordinarily, when we look at the screen behind our eyes and it's blank and dark, you could say we're looking at emptiness, at *mushin*. Earlier I said that when the conscious mind looks at that doorway into the big mind, into emptiness, it will always appear to be blank and dark. But actually, that's not quite true. It will always appear to be blank and dark until a decisive event happens. You may have had the experience of being in a space where there's a large glass window looking out at something at night. Because the lights are bright in the room where you are, when you look at the glass window, all you see is a reflection of the room. You see yourself, you see the table, you see the other people. And then at some point—maybe it's the end of the evening, the party is over, and everybody's left—you flip off the lights, and now you can see through the glass window, and you realize that on the other side, there's something you never realized was there all night long.

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This is what happens to us when we experience what Zen people call *dai kensho*. It's as though we've turned the lights off in front of our eyes and the screen behind our eyes is clear, and instead of seeing a blank, dark surface, we see something else, which is the *dharmakaya*, the luminous, compassionate core of Buddha nature at the center of consciousness itself. That is the source or the mind root of consciousness. Many people in the Zen tradition have experienced this, and not only in the Zen tradition, but in Tibetan Buddhism, in the Theravada tradition, and in other traditions as well. Years ago, Mr. Goenka visited our community here in New Jersey, and I listened very carefully to how he described the enlightenment experience, and it was quite familiar. It's the same process, same outcome.

This may happen to you at some point if you keep practicing, but you can't make it happen. You can't try to see through that darkness to the mind root, to the *dharmakaya*, the luminous, compassionate core of consciousness itself. All you can do in this life is continue to clear away your karmic obstacles, continue to empty the storehouse mind. As I said, it's like pulling things out of a bag. You just sit down on the cushion and whatever comes up, you just clean up. You keep cleaning, cleaning, cleaning and practicing, practicing, practicing, practicing, and it may be the case that one day that blank glass wall will become transparent and you will see through it. In Zen, we call that *dai kensho*, great awakening. When we sit down on the cushion and we have a moment of *samadhi*, that's kind of a little awakening. When we enter *mushin*, or emptiness, for the first time, that can be a shock. It's beautiful. And that's an awakening. When we begin to work through some of our most serious obstacles, things that have hobbled us for years and years and of which we have not even been aware, that's *kensho*. That's an opening. But eventually, what happens is this decisive opening, *dai kensho*, great awakening. And when that happens, we're transformed. There's no question about it. We're transformed. Until that happens, I'm Kurt practicing Zen, and somewhere at the core of my mind is the *dharmakaya*. But after that happens,

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I'm the dharmakaya being Kurt right now. To be Kurt is now like I am the dharmakaya staying in a motel room called Kurt right now.

That's the change. But it's not perfect. It's not complete. Only for the Buddha himself is there no karmic residue. The Buddha himself reached that luminous, compassionate Buddha mind, and there was nothing left other than that. For the Buddha, there was just one screen. But for ordinary people like us, for normal human beings, even if we experience dai kensho, there are still two screens. We see through the barrier of the blank mind, and we see the luminous Buddha nature face to face, so we go through this psychological transformation where we realize I am not Kurt. That pure, luminous consciousness is the source of this thing I call Kurt. But there's still Kurt. There's still a residue. There's still a split-screen reality. When you sit down on the cushion and you focus, you can be in that dharmakaya consciousness, but when you get off the cushion and you go to work, sometimes it seems very far away. Something's going wrong at work, somebody's doing something, or your teenage daughter is yelling at you again, and that seems very far away.

The work of Zen practice if you have had the dai kensho experience is actually the same as the work of Zen practice if you haven't had the dai kensho experience—back to cleaning. In Zen, it's sometimes called going up the mountain and going down the mountain. Going down the mountain means if we have had the good fortune of encountering the dharmakaya, the rest of our lives we spend integrating the world of our experience out here with the experience of the dharmakaya in here until there is no “out here” and no “in here.” There's just one mind, which is reality, which is the real reality. That takes a long time, and there are many challenges, and that never gets finished. For a Buddha it's finished. But for us, that work never ends. There's always a karmic residue we have to clean up.

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By the way, I always say to people that if anybody ever says to you, “I have cleaned up all my karma. I am completely enlightened without remainder,” please turn around and walk away from that person immediately and never trust that person because that person is either deceiving you or deceiving themselves. Buddhas are quite rare. I have known many people who have had the experience of dai kensho, and I know it quite well myself, and I can tell you that there are no Buddhas, but there are many bodhisattvas who are practicing very hard. If you have that experience, enjoy it, have a cup of tea, pat yourself on the back. It’s OK. It’s great. But then you get back to work. You clean up your karma.

Cleaning up your karma means continuing to practice meditation on the cushion, but it also means practicing meditation off the cushion. In Zen we have a whole panoply of activities: Zen flower arrangement, Zen tea ceremony, Zen archery, and so on. People who don’t know much about Zen ask, “What is this all about? This is like a sales pitch. What does archery have to do with meditation? What does archery have to do with enlightenment?” And indeed, nobody has ever reached dai kensho by shooting arrows into a target or doing kendo. That’ll never happen. You will never have dai kensho fencing with bamboo staves. But part of the practice is integrating, and when we are engaged in a difficult task, arranging flowers or making a bowl of tea, we go through all the same experiences that we go through when we’re working through our obstacles on the cushion.

For example, if you’re doing tea ceremony, if you’ve done it 1,000 times, it’s possible to enter into deep samadhi and be in a thoughtless state and the dharmakaya can emerge as you’re making tea. But that’s an advanced state. The ritual of tea ceremony is fairly demanding and requires a lot of attention. Generally speaking, if you’re working on preparing a bowl of tea, you can make mistakes, you can get things out of order, you can spill tea, and so on. As you’re doing that, you can find yourself frustrated or feeling worried about your performance. You become self-conscious when things don’t go right. It feels like you’re running through sand. All of that is

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now an opportunity to practice off the cushion. Even though you're not sitting on your cushion, you go into blank mind. When these anxieties arise, you work them through, and eventually you become clear and unobstructed. If you've had dai kensho, the light of the dharmakaya comes shining through, and it's like the fusion of these two screens. The two screens become one. If you haven't had dai kensho, it's very valuable to do this also because you have all of these obstacles arising, you feel frustrated, you feel embarrassed that you've spilled powdered tea on the beautiful tatami mat, but then you enter mushin, your mind becomes blank, you feel the obstacles going away, and then you suddenly realize it's OK to spill tea on the tatami mat. Masters like Sen no Rikyu probably did that. So it's okay, and in fact, all is one right now. You begin to feel a sense of everything as interconnected.

These kinds of off-the-cushion practices are not sales pitches. They're genuinely advanced forms of liberation. All of this is part of the Zen world, and all of this involves the practice of emptiness. I'd like to say a little bit more, however, about what happens to you as you go forward and you continue to practice emptiness meditation. Let's say you practice diligently and wholeheartedly. You go to sesshin. You meditate every day for an hour. (That would be wonderful, by the way. Your life will be better in a million ways if you do that.) But let's say after 10 years, you're saying, "I've been practicing for 10 years, and I haven't had dai kensho." You might find this is a case of no truth in advertising. "Where was the dai kensho? I've worked so hard for this." Let me just say that in my experience, there are people who have the dai kensho experience very early in their lives, and then there are great masters who may take 50 years.

For example, I believe that Xuyun was the greatest is Zen master of the last 400 years. That's just my opinion, but if you study his biography and his teachings, I think you will agree. I personally think he's the consummate Zen master of the last 400 years. He became a monk when he was 19 years old. His parents wanted him to marry. There was an arranged marriage. His father was afraid he was going to leave and go into the sangha, and he married his son to these two beautiful

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young women. Xuyun and his wives did not consummate their relationship. Xuyun prepared his escape, and as soon as his father died, he dissolved that marriage and entered the order. His wives did too, and they actually became very accomplished Zen teachers in their own right. Xuyun practiced diligently, and he didn't have his dai kensho until he was 54 years old.

There have been deeply awakened people who haven't had dai kensho, and so if you have gone through 10 years of practice, or 20 years of practice, or 30 years of practice, and you have never had the experience of dai kensho, please don't fall into the trap of returning to self-centered perspective. This is very important. When you are cleaning up karma, most of the time, it seems to be your own karma. When you're sitting on the cushion and you're focusing on the emptiness and your teenage daughter yelling at you comes up, or your failure to get into Columbia comes up (or my failure to get into Columbia, I should say), or maybe you asked somebody to marry you and they turned you down, that's your personal karma. But actually, there is no such thing as personal karma. That, too, is an illusion, like the existence of a screen separate from the big mind, separate from the dharmakaya. The idea that we're cleaning up our own karma is a symptom of a conceptual mistake we made very early in our lives. When we're cleaning up karma, we're cleaning up everybody's karma. It's very difficult to draw a boundary between your karma and my karma and the karma of everybody else.

If you're sitting down on the cushion and you're upset because you didn't get a promotion, first of all, you're not the only person who never got a promotion, but also this very idea of a promotion is a fiction that circulates. In other words, in the scheme of things, in a universe that's 13.5 billion years old and in a Buddhist multiverse that's infinite in all directions, promotions don't really have much reality. But a promotion is something we have created in the modern world that we put a lot of stock in. It's just circulated. It's just like money. It's not really ours. It's just an idea that's circulated that triggers all these conditioned responses.

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When you're on the cushion and you're practicing the great way of Zen and you're cleaning up your karma, you're cleaning up everybody's karma. And when somebody has a dai kensho experience, they really can't say, "I deserved this, I deserve enlightenment." Nobody deserves enlightenment, and when and how it happens and if it happens is really beyond our control. And if we cling to that experience as the hallmark of our practice, it's not just destructive; it returns us to a state of mind which is self-cherishing and delusional. I'm cleaning up everybody's practice, everybody's karma. My practice is everybody's practice. And if somebody has the good fortune of having this experience, it's not the hallmark that they have become divine.

It's like we're wandering around in this big house, and one day we open a door, and this light comes pouring through. The light is there all the time. It's there in you. It's there in me. It's there every day, every moment for everybody. But unfortunately, we don't always get to see it. If you're going through this big house and you open this door and light comes pouring through, it's not really your accomplishment. You've stumbled into something that's there and that's real, and it's a wonderful moment to have that experience, and please report back to the rest of the human community about this, as the Buddha did. But it's really not your accomplishment. What it does mean, though, is that you should get back to work right away cleaning up everybody's karma and being the best bodhisattva you can be.

This is the Zen path. This is the essence of our practice. There are many other paths, so feel free to experiment, but if you find this congenial and you continue to practice emptiness meditation, I believe that your life will be better in countless different ways, and not only your life, but the life of other people as well. In *Linji Yulu*, which is a collection of sayings by Master Linji or Rinzai, there's a wonderful little story where Linji is up in the mountains far from the temple planting trees. Somebody comes up and sees him and says, "What are you doing? You're planting these trees, but the temple's far away. Who's going to see these trees?" Linji says, "It's not for now.

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Someday, somebody will benefit from these trees. For now, there doesn't seem to be anybody standing to gain from this, but I'm not just thinking about now.”

Every time you clean up your karma, every time you work through your obstacles, everybody who knows you will benefit, and countless people who don't know you will benefit. I'm totally convinced that if we all practiced meditation, if we all practiced the Buddha's way, then the world would be a vastly better place. When I sit down on the cushion and I meditate, I'm taking care of myself. I'm still Kurt in a certain way. I'm still taking care of Kurt, and I'm taking care of other things as well. But ultimately, what I'm helping to do is creating the Pure Land. I'm creating a world where enlightenment is not living in the back alleys of the world but is front and center in the lives of humankind. That will benefit all sentient beings. Our world today is far from the Pure Land. When we look at places like Bhutan or old Tibet or China in the Tang Dynasty or Japan in certain periods of its history, which had vast enterprises designed to help people wake up, people created a Pure Land, a society where compassion and wisdom are at the center of life. We don't have that now. We live in a dark world in a lot of ways. But it's our job to work on the cushion and off the cushion to create the Pure Land. Let's all do that together, and everybody will benefit. I'm at your disposal in any way that I can be. Please continue to seek your awakening and the liberation of all sentient beings. Thank you.