

Kurt Spellmeyer

*Meditating with Emptiness*

Week One: “The Mind’s Two Screens”

March 5, 2022



Hello, welcome to the first in our four-week series on meditation. The approach I’m going to use is primarily from Zen meditation. I’ve been practicing Zen for about 40 years, and I’ve been teaching Zen for probably close to 30 of those years. It’s been my experience that when you talk about Zen, it’s probably a good idea to say something about kensho. People love to talk about enlightenment, and I do too. Zen has a really lively literary tradition. You might know about koans. People do crazy things. They put shoes on their head, they jump out of windows, or they push people out of windows.

All of that can have a certain appeal. You can talk about breathing through the *hara*, your abdominal region, and you can talk about qi, you can talk about kendo, you can talk about fencing, archery, the Zen of tea, and so on. All that’s very enticing. But when you say to people, “Would you like to study emptiness?” they’re not necessarily ready to sign on. And that’s because we bring to emptiness a kind of hesitancy. That’s part of the reason I decided, as a matter of fact, to put emptiness front and center in this series. I thought, Why don’t we come out of the closet and say the truth? Emptiness is really important for the Zen tradition. In fact, it’s central, I think, to all the Buddhist traditions.

I’ll say something about how emptiness meditation works, but before I do, I’d like to say a little bit about why emptiness is important in general. We all understand the first noble truth, the truth of suffering, and we also understand the third noble truth, which is that there’s a possibility of a release from suffering. But the relationship between the first noble truth and the third noble truth isn’t necessarily clear. Sometimes we do things to release ourselves from suffering that aren’t actually liberating and that have the effect of prolonging our suffering because we don’t understand our real situation.

For example, let’s say you have a job that’s very demanding, you have a high-stress environment, and your day is long. Around 3:00pm, you find yourself really tired, and you know you still have

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hours to go. You can have your coffee, but there’s a real problem with your morale, so it occurs to you that you could do something during the day that would help you get through those last hours. You remember you smoked in college, so you decide, “Maybe I’ll try smoking again.” If you’ve ever smoked, you know that there’s something profoundly enticing about smoking. You might be under a lot of stress, but then you think, “Oh, in an hour, I can have a cigarette,” and then you’ll get back to work. When you have your cigarette, it’s like a timeout. It’s like everything disappears, and now it’s just you and the cigarette. You light that cigarette and you inhale, and almost instantly, you get a nicotine rush. You feel elated, optimistic, and powerful, and now when you go back to your work, you feel you have a sense of mastery of your situation and your brain is working a little better. All good, right? End of suffering. Or is it? Of course, we know that if you make that decision, you’re not actually releasing yourself from suffering. You’re going to create more suffering for yourself. Suffering actually persists even when you’re smoking the cigarette. It’s just muffled, or it’s become more subtle. You’ve concealed it from yourself, but it’s still there. And it’s still there because you don’t really understand your situation. This is a real problem, a much bigger problem than people realize.

Many people actually approach meditation in a way that’s not so different from what I just talked about. In other words, just as you might reach for a cigarette to deal with your stress, you might decide to learn to meditate to deal with your stress. So you have a stressful day, you have lots of problems, you come home, you sit down on the cushion, you begin to watch your breath, and if you practice regularly, it doesn’t take long to feel a big difference. You feel a lot better. So you sit down on the cushion, you straighten your back, maybe you’ve learned to do abdominal breathing from the *dantian*, the *hara*, where you squeeze the breath out, out, out until it’s gone.

If you do that multiple times during a week for 20–30 minutes, in a month, you’re going to find you have this experience where you begin to enter a very calm, centered place. It might not always happen every time you sit down on the cushion. But if you do this regularly, religiously,

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you’re going to find that you enter this state of calm centeredness and peace. When you’re in that place, you think, “This is wonderful. I love meditation.” And then you get off the cushion, and you go about your business. You get up the next day, the office is still stressful, but this has helped you a little bit.

Now, if this is all Buddhism could do for you, it would not necessarily be doing you a favor because what you’ve done is create a little island of calm in a sea of stress, fear, and anger. In a way, if you create that little island of calm, you haven’t done anything to change any of that, and you’ve actually made it more possible for you to live the way you’ve been living all along. This may be a bit shocking, but in this way, meditation could actually be doing you an injury: it’s possible that you don’t quit your job because you’re afraid of certain kinds of uncertainty or insecurity even though your job makes you miserable. Sitting on the cushion and meditating, entering that beautiful, calm, centered place, which is so wonderful and which is genuinely a kind of deliverance from suffering, might in the long run be doing you an injury—you might be better served to quit your job, to look for a new job, or to go back to school.

In a way, this practice, which looks so liberating, can be destructive ultimately, which is not so different from smoking. And that’s because we have cordoned off our moment of serenity, our moment of calm, and we’ve used it to protect ourselves from looking at our own circumstances in a critical way, in a way that is designed to change not just those circumstances but who we are as people. My feeling is that in the world today, and certainly in America today, meditation has become popular, and I fear, although I don’t know, that there are a lot of people who are practicing in just the way I’ve described. So how do we avoid that? How do we avoid using our practice as a way of actually reinforcing our mental habits that, in the long term, will cause us more suffering?

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This is why emptiness is so important. We make decisions that are shaped by our prior assumptions, and if we have assumptions that are based on greed, anger, and delusion and we make decisions on that basis, over time, that’s going to produce deeply ingrained patterns of suffering. We don’t see them because we’ve made free choices all along. We’ve made the best decisions we can, but all the same, over time, those decisions have an effect that’s negative, and we can’t see it because it’s part of our everyday reality. You don’t have to look far for countless examples of this, of people who have taken care in their lives and made good decisions, it seems, but behind their good decisions are motives that they’ve been unaware of and which have destructive consequences.

Maybe you feel that you’re an unlovable person, and maybe you never confronted the reasons for that. Maybe as a child, your parents didn’t pay attention to you and give you the love you needed and deserved, and you left feeling unlovable. Then you’re lonely and unhappy, and you meet somebody. You might, on some level, be aware that this person isn’t really a good fit for you, but you want so much to be loved, and this is perhaps your only chance to be loved, so you decide to marry this person. From the beginning, you might experience a lot of suffering. You might say, “How did this happen to me? How could I have made such a bad decision?”

We all make bad decisions. We don’t know what the future brings. But sometimes the behaviors we engage in have been shaped by fears and attachments that we’re unaware of. In fact, that’s true for all human beings. We create a structure of reality, we create a world around ourselves based on our prior actions, and those actions often have sources that we’re unaware of. The Buddhist word for this is *vasana*, energy habits or habit energies. Things happen to us, and we respond in the best way we can. We don’t always choose how we respond. But if it works, consciously or unconsciously, we repeat, and we keep repeating even when it stops working because it’s become a deeply ingrained habit.

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This is samsara. Samsara literally means going around and around in a circle. We create these patterns of behavior, these habit energies, and eventually they lock us in. The problem is that they feel familiar even if they cause us suffering. They feel real even if they cause us suffering. And, of course, the world we’ve created around us feels perfectly real too even if it’s full of misconceptions and misperceptions and even if it causes us suffering as well. So the problem is how do we get out of this? How do we get out of this dilemma?

If we choose to do meditation, it’s a good step, but not if you don’t begin to undo those habit energies. The sources of those are invisible, and even their destructive character is often invisible. The strategy that Zen has developed is to use the experience of emptiness as a way of stepping outside our familiar habit energies, our familiar patterns of behavior, our familiar patterns of thought and perception, which are all colored and shaped by our karma. That karma is generally invisible to us, so emptiness really is the door. It’s the way we step out of our familiar mental habits and patterned behaviors. Once we’ve stepped out, we can begin to re-enter the world of form, the world of our assumptions and behaviors and self-understanding, with a kind of unbiased mind.

So how do we do that? First of all, it’s very important to meditate regularly, and it’s very important to be able to get into that wonderful state of centeredness and balance and calm. The word for that in Buddhism is *samadhi*. When you sit down on the cushion and begin to watch your breath, there are all kinds of thoughts obstructing your attention. The breath is over here, and the thoughts are over here, and you’re dragging yourself over to the breath, and then you’re back to your thoughts, and back and forth. This can go on for weeks. If you practice more, it’ll be less protracted, but this problem of getting past your thoughts is a big problem.

Eventually, though, at first the thoughts are here and the breath is over here, but then there’s a shift, and the breath is here, and the thoughts are going by like clouds in the sky, but they’re not

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at the center of your attention. This is a really important moment in your meditation practice, where you have one-pointed attention on the breath. Most people don't pay close attention to this, but if you are able to reach that state, something happens to you. In other words, when you are able to be centered on the breath and the thoughts are just flowing by like clouds in the sky, we undergo a change that at first is very subtle, and then it can become very dramatic. We enter samadhi.

When we enter samadhi, something has happened to us that we may not be consciously aware of. But one way to explain it is this. Ordinarily, we feel very separate from the world around us. When I'm going through the day, behind my eyes, there are all these thoughts, and in front of me are the events that I'm witnessing, and those two worlds exist in conflict with each other. If I'm upset by something at work, when I come home and my dog is barking at me, I yell at my dog, but I'm not really yelling at my dog—I'm yelling at my boss because he yelled at me. Behind my eyes, on the screen in my head, I'm still replaying the events of the day, and they're shaping how I experience events in the current moment. So I'm carrying that around with me. It's operating subliminally or just below the threshold of my awareness, but it's shaping my responses to everything around me.

When you sit down on the cushion, you may close your eyes or keep them half-open, and that screen behind your eyes is still running. So you sit down on the cushion, and you see all the events of the day going through your head, and when you open your eyes, that screen is still running, and it's still coloring how you perceive the world around you. It's still shaping how you perceive the world around you. But when we begin to meditate and we stop focusing on our thoughts, on the stream of consciousness, eventually, we get to a place where the screen behind our eyes becomes blank at certain moments. And then when we're listening to a sound or looking at a square of light in front of us on the floor, the sense of separation between ourselves

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in the world disappears. When that sense of separation disappears, we become one with the object of our attention.

Typically, in that moment, self-referencing stops because the self is produced by that separation between screen and screen, separation between thought and world, mental life and the world. When that separation disappears, self-referencing stops. In fact, you could say the self disappears, and we merge with the object of our attention, and that feels like liberation. That is absolutely wonderful. But it’s not really liberation. It’s a step towards liberation. Because now we have been released from our suffering, but we aren’t fully released because we haven’t begun to discover and undo our vasana, the habit energies that are causing us suffering on a crude or a subtle level as we go through the day.

So it’s absolutely crucial to be able to enter that state of selfless unification with the object of your attention as samadhi. And when we enter samadhi, it feels absolutely beautiful. It’s the most beautiful feeling. But if you stay in samadhi, you never overcome many of your crippling mental habits. They remain unchanged. And so in that way, meditation, even samadhi, can operate like smoking a cigarette. You can do something wrong, you can do something terrible, then you come in and sit down and enter samadhi, and all is well. You feel better. But that’s not liberation. That’s not wisdom. And that doesn’t produce compassion. So what we have to do is begin to dismantle those deeper structures, those vasanas, those habit energies, which are often invisible to us.

When you’re meditating in the next week, please try to become aware of something beyond samadhi. If you’re just beginning this process, you can work on focusing on your breath and working past your thoughts and trying to be present with your breath. If you’re able to do that, you may find moments where you’re entering this thoughtless state, and in that thoughtless state, you can unify with the object of your attention, the breath. You may or may not feel blissful and

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wonderful, but it’s probably the case that you will. There are degrees of samadhi. You can be in deep samadhi, or you can be in light samadhi, and it won’t be continuous. You won’t have stopped all thinking for 35 minutes, but you’ll have intervals in your practice where you begin to enter a thoughtless state. It’s like the screen behind your eyes has gone blank, and you merge with the object of your attention. When that happens, you feel wonderful. If you stay in that state, you will never liberate yourself from your vasana. So what we have to do is something else. We have to start practicing emptiness meditation. It’s typical in Zen that the teacher will give students the breath perception meditation task first, and once the student can enter into samadhi and stops self-referencing and merges with the object of attention, it’s time to move on to step two. Step two is emptiness meditation.

As you’re watching the breath, you’re going to be entering samadhi intermittently. You’ll have periods where the thoughts return and so on. But as you’re watching the breath and you’re entering samadhi intermittently, please follow the breath out to the end of the breath. At the end of the breath, you may notice that there’s an interval where the breath ends, and then you start to breathe in again. There’s an interval where there’s nothing. So you follow the breath out, out, out until it’s gone, and then you draw your breath in. Often people who are beginners at this game count the breath, so the first out-breath is one, the second out-breath is two, up to ten, and you might go back. But when you get to the end of the breath, if you look very carefully and you have developed a kind of mental stabilization, you’ll notice that there is an interval, and it may be very brief, just like that [snaps], of nothing. It feels like nothing. So please focus on that. At the end of the breath, there’s an interval typically between the last part of your exhalation and the first part of your inhalation. There’s a little gap or a space. If you focus your attention there, you may begin to notice that there’s this blankness. So the task for this week is to find that space if you can, and if you can, try to keep returning to it.

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In the Zen tradition, people usually start with breath perception, and then when they find that they can stabilize the mind and have one-pointed attention fusing with the breath, the teacher will often tell them to call *mu*. *Mu* means emptiness. So the student starts saying “mu” on each out-breath instead of “one, two, three.” I invite you to try that, but it’s not necessary right now for you to do that. What’s important is for you to find that space. So follow the breath out. When you get to the end of the breath just before the breath resumes, there’s a little interval that has no content, no nothing. For now, we can call that emptiness.

So please go to the end of the breath, find that space, and see if you can pay attention to it, if you can hold your attention on it. Please don’t stop breathing, but just pay attention to that space. What you may find is that you can get there with some regularity. You may also find that at first, it’s just an instant, and then it begins to feel as though it is a longer interval. If that’s the case, that would be a good thing. Please give that a try in the coming week and see how that works out. I’m full of suggestions, and if you respond to this session, I’m happy to respond to you in turn. Please give this a try, and next week we’ll talk about what to do next once we can enter that empty space.