

Guo Gu

*Meditation Month 2021: Silent Illumination*

Week 1: “Relax and Connect”

March 1, 2021



Hello everyone, my name is Guo Gu. I am the teacher and founder of the Tallahassee Chan Center here in Florida. A little bit about myself: I have been practicing [Buddhism] for close to 40 years with Chan Master Sheng-yen, who passed away in 2009. I began with him as a kid, and I was very fortunate to study with him. He was one of the most important Chan masters of our time. My teaching is really a tribute to him in a sense, repaying my gratitude to him and paying forward by sharing with all of you.

I am delighted to be here with Tricycle magazine for this four-week series on silent illumination. Silent illumination is a Chan practice; Chan is the precursor of Zen. It's the Chinese Zen. This is a practice that reveals our natural awakening. It taps into the intrinsic qualities of the mind. There are two aspects of the practice, poetically expressed as silent illumination. But in terms of practice, we're talking about the simultaneous practice of *shamatha* [calm abiding meditation] and *vipassana* [insight meditation]; stillness and clarity. We reveal the nature of the mind and our intrinsic freedom through the simultaneous practice of these two.

So we will be talking about the topic of silent illumination in this series. We'll start at a beginner-friendly level and progress to more advanced practices. I'll be here with you during this March Meditation Month; you'll have teachings proper, and you'll also have live interactions with me, I'll guide you through.

In week one, I will be teaching foundational practices. One of the most important is progressive relaxation. This meditation helps us get more in tune with our bodies. Most people live their lives disconnected from how they actually feel the body. So first, to be more in tune with the body, and second, to tap into the undercurrent feeling tones that shape our experiences. This is very important. Week two will build on the foundation of this week and cover what I call somatic integration, working with body, breath, and mind-heart. We will practice meditation on the breath in a particular way. In week three, I will talk about a practice called direct contemplation. I'll teach about the nature of perception, how that shapes our experiences, and what is considered valid perception. I'll describe how our perception shapes our world and constructs our reality. The method I'll be introducing is called direct contemplation, it's a sensory perceptual practice. And in our last week, I will introduce silent illumination. What is silent illumination? How can we practice shamatha and vipassana—stillness and clarity—simultaneously? This is what I call embodied experiencing. We'll explore the question, what is the nature of experience? So there we have it. We have the four-week series.

One of the most important things about this practice is that it is embodied. It brings the body, heart, and mind together. Most of us live our lives in such a way that when our body is doing something, our mind is somewhere else. This is how our lives and our defense mechanisms

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work. We're constantly in this mode of discursive thinking and rumination. Even the gift of the dharma—and the teachings here—comes to us through concepts, through perception, so we resort to our natural habit of thinking about it. We try to fathom it, try to understand it through this filtered lens of discursive thinking, words, and language. As linguistic beings, we are really dictated and limited by words and language.

Of course, words and language are important. They help us navigate daily life. But they also limit us. The nature of words is that they reify things, they solidify things. We're so used to reifying things, we make a thing out of everything that we experience. When we can reify things, it becomes real for us, right. So in the process of solidifying things—the Buddhist lingo would be "attachment"—when we reify things, our self comes into being, and others come into being. So we're constantly in this process of solidifying ourselves, reifying ourselves, and othering people. In fact, we can actually other ourselves! We can create or construct an image of ourselves. "I'm too fat, I'm too tall, I'm too skinny, I am this, I am that." We make ourselves into an object of attachment, of attack, of criticism. Words and language are useful to help us to navigate through life, but also very dangerous and limiting.

Because of this—our habitual tendency of being tethered through words and language—most of us are actually living in our heads. So our energy is up here [points to head]. When our energy is up here, instead of being grounded, we're not connected to the body. We're no longer in tune with how we actually feel. We're not in tune with the different tensions and the shifts of our movements.

When we are disconnected from the body, we, unfortunately, are no longer connected to the undercurrent feeling tones, these undercurrent subtle thoughts. By thoughts, I don't mean fully formed, conceptualize thinking, what I mean is these undercurrent feeling tones like moods. We're no longer in tune with that. When we're not in tune with these moods we are really blindsided by how these subtle undercurrents are shaping our lives, shaping our perception, and shaping our experiences. For example, if you're in a good mood, someone can bump into you and you feel fine. If you're in a bad mood, even someone waving at you, you can feel annoyed. So it's these undercurrent tones that are actually shaping our experiences.

So one of the most important practices I want to introduce to you is called progressive relaxation. Let's do it now. This is the practice in which when we sit, we begin with the crown of our head. Closing our eyes, sitting upright, relaxed. Through tactile sensations bring your awareness to the crown. You can use your fingers. Feel this area [the top of the head], and then take your hand away. Allow the sensation to continue to be there and then bring the sensation down to the forehead. The first area to be aware of is the eye region. So you want to raise your eyebrows up;

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tense up, in other words, and release. This practice is about becoming more and more in tune with different body parts. Allow the sensation to sweep down to the eyes, eyelids, relax. Again, don't talk to yourself. Don't command yourself. Actually feel the tactile sensations, relaxing the eyelids, not using the eyes, feeling the eyeballs releasing tension. And then allow the release to extend to the plains of the cheeks, the chin, gentle smile. And then bring it down from the top of your head again now this time to the back. Bring it all the way down the back to the shoulders. The second most important part: raise up your shoulders, tense up, and release. You can do it a few times. Next, relax the whole arm down to your fingertips. And then becoming more aware of your breath and how that affects the rise and fall of your chest.

Now you can use your breath, especially the exhalations, to release the tension. Then bring it down to the abdomen, feeling the rise and fall of your breath. Release. Using your exhalations now, once you exhale, drop the sense of bodily weight down. So feeling your buttocks connected to the cushion, connected to the earth, extending it down.

So people typically do several rounds of this. That's how I teach it. Mastering this practice before using a method, so after this is done, then take a moment to feel undercurrent feeling tones right now. How do you actually feel? After the body is relaxed and grounded, you should feel content, being at ease, needing nothing from the outside. With this priming of the body and the heart, bring a level of awareness, clarity, to whatever method that you're using. So that is the importance of progressive relaxation.

I encourage you to really try to master this in your daily sits during this week. Don't think of this as a preliminary practice, don't think it's not important or it's just foundational. This is an extremely important practice. So in your daily sits, practice progressive relaxation from your head down. There are some areas you may not be able to feel; that's fine. Move on to the next section. So practice this every day for the next week.

In the next video, I will talk about somatic integration, building on the foundation of this to work with the breath. I will talk about bringing together body, breath, and mind in the present moment. Thank you.