

Kurt Spellmeyer

*Meditating with Emptiness*

Week Two: “From Samadhi to Emptiness”

March 12, 2022



Hello, this is the second in our four-part series on meditating with emptiness. You might remember that the last time we met, I spoke about entering the state known as *samadhi*. When you begin to meditate, your teacher might ask you to focus on the breath. You sit down on the cushion, and you watch the first out-breath, the second out-breath, the third out-breath, and as you're making this effort, the thoughts keep intruding on your attention, screening the breath out. But you persist, and eventually the thoughts move to the margin, and at the center of your attention is the breath itself. At some point, you undergo a change which you might not fully understand, but you know that you feel so much better. You feel grounded. You feel safe and connected to the things around you. That state is known as *samadhi*. It's a milestone in your practice and can be a really wonderful experience.

Last time, however, I pointed out that *samadhi* is not the endpoint in the process of liberation—it's actually a preliminary state. When we enter *samadhi*, the boundary between ourselves and the object of our attention disappears, and we merge with that object. It's a nondualistic experience. Usually, our self-referencing stops. There's a very famous koan where the Buddha goes to Vulture Peak to deliver a talk, as he did regularly, and he holds up a flower. Everybody's watching him hold up the flower, but only one person understands what he's communicating when instead of delivering his talk, he remains silent. The flower itself is the talk he's delivering. It is said that only one person, Mahakasyapa, his senior disciple, smiled and understood. When we look at the flower, we bring all kinds of associations to the flower. We remember spring, we remember past loves, we remember our mother, and it's difficult to be fully present with the flower without allowing our thoughts to intrude or imposing on the flower all of these projections, memories, and expectations. When all of those go away and we are present with the flower 100%, we become one with the flower. This is a nondualistic experience.

But as I say, this is actually not the highest level of meditative attainment. It's not liberation. You can tell that this is not the case under certain circumstances. For example, let's say you come

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home after a busy day. You sit down on the cushion, you start watching the breath, the thoughts are intruding, and all of a sudden the thoughts move to the side and you are present with the breath and the boundary between yourself and the breath collapses, you merge with the breath, and you feel wonderful. You're in paradise, and you're sitting there thinking, "This is so wonderful." And then somebody knocks on the door, and you find, maybe to your own surprise, that you become angry because they're interrupting your beautiful experience of meditation. Now at that moment, you have a glimpse of something that's not visible to you as you're meditating. There's something out of you that is motivating a response which is at the very least unkind, or there might even be anger in your response. Where's that coming from? It's not visible in the samadhi experience, but it's very clear that whatever is happening on the cushion has left untouched those deeper structures of the self and relationships to the world.

The world itself, I should add, is not the real world but the world we have constructed through our interactions with it. As we're going along from day to day, we are actually creating a simulacrum of the real world, which is what's present to us in our own experience. Our own experience shapes the world as we know it. Things that happen to us color our experiences as they unfold, and they determine what we select and what we deflect, and out of that comes the fabric of our mental image of the world. It would be nice if we had an unmediated experience of reality, but actually, only a Buddha has a completely unmediated experience of reality. The reality we see that we have access to is a product of our energy habits over time. Three people might walk into the same room, and one person might say, "I feel so relaxed in this room. It's so comforting." Another person might say, "I don't know what you're talking about. This is the ugliest room I've ever seen. I feel completely ill at ease here." Another person might say, "It's too cold in here." All of these people are having different responses. You could say it's the same room, but everybody's having a different experience of the room because our experience of reality and our experience of the world is shaped by our prior experience of the world and by the decisions we've made. Generally speaking, what we see is never things as they really are but

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things as we're able to see them. We are always projecting our expectations onto the world, and those expectations shape how we go forward.

Entering nondualistic awareness does not actually liberate us from all of our illusions. The world we're experiencing as part of ourselves is still this world that's deeply distorted by our prior experience, and so we need something more radical than samadhi. Samadhi itself is not inherently liberating. The word *samadhi* simply indicates nondualistic awareness, and it's possible to enter many different samadhi states. There's a samadhi, for example, of riding your bicycle. Sometimes when you're riding your bicycle, you become motion itself. You become the bicycle in motion. You become running itself. All self-referencing stops. You totally merge with the bicycle. Another example is you go to a restaurant and order a delicious Thai meal, and they bring out your favorite drunken noodles, and when you taste those drunken noodles, you become one with the drunken noodles. You go to a jazz concert, and you forget the time, you forget the place. But it's not necessarily liberating. It's not necessarily freeing you from the world you've constructed. There is a samadhi, I suppose, of boxing where you lose yourself in punching your opponent. There's a samadhi of sex. There's a samadhi of anger where you can become the very soul of anger. Even though samadhi is so celebrated in Buddhist practice, it isn't necessarily liberating. This is why the Buddha, when he left home and he began to practice, didn't stop at the experience of samadhi. He went on to study with some of the foremost teachers of his time, and he learned how to enter emptiness, *shunyata*, zeroness. This is a key element of the deeper stages of the path because the world we live in is not the real world, but it's a simulacrum of the real world that we have constructed through the things we select and exclude and that's shaped by our own fears and attachments all the time. When we merge with that world, we're not really freeing ourselves from those deeper structures of the self that are perpetuating our ignorance.

When we sit down on the cushion and we watch the breath, a very interesting thing will happen naturally. You're watching the breath, and maybe at some point, you merge with the breath, you

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become one with the breath, you enter that wonderful state. But if you keep watching the breath, you may notice that your mind goes blank. Another example of this is if you meditate on something like a candle. This is not a standard practice in Zen, but it's a commonplace enough practice. If you put a candle in front of you and you're meditating and you focus on the candle, at some point, you'll notice that your awareness of the candle disappears. At some point, any object of attention that you focus on intensely will disappear. And this is a clue that there's more to reality than we realize. There's more to reality than ordinary consciousness accommodates. Any object of attention that you focus on intensely will eventually lead you to this blank, empty state.

In Zen practice, this happens when people focus on the breath. So if the teacher asks you to focus on the breath, you might focus on the breath, and at some point, you might come into the teacher for your private interview, and instead of saying, “The breath is going out my nose,” or “The breath is going out my forehead,” you might just say, “I was watching the breath, and my mind went completely blank.” At that point, the teacher might say to you, “OK, please return to that blindness.” In Zen, we use a strategy called calling *mu*, which I mentioned a bit last time. When people call *mu*, instead of silently vocalizing a number, “one, two, three,” on each of their out-breaths, they focus on this Japanese word *mu*, which means “emptiness” or “not.” In Chinese, it's *wu*. In Sanskrit, it's *shunyata*, zeroness. So you're saying *mu* on each out-breath. *Mu* is not difficult to hold in your mind. It's a short syllable. The belief is you can only focus on one thing at a time, so when you're focusing on *mu*, you don't have time for ambient thoughts or anything else to occupy your attention. You get to the end of the breath calling *mu*, and it's often the case that you'll begin to notice that there's this empty space, this emptiness. As I mentioned last time, it's usually just for a second. But if you keep practicing, you'll begin to notice that that emptiness grows deeper and deeper. It becomes wider and wider. So at first it's just a moment. But you keep returning to that place, and you begin to notice that it's becoming more and more substantial, more and more all-encompassing. This is the practice of *mu*.

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In this state, you have more or less stepped out of the whole system of mental representations that creates the world. In the deeper states of *mushin*, or empty mind, self-referencing stops, as it does with all forms of samadhi. If samadhi is nondualistic awareness, what you've done is to merge with emptiness itself. So instead of merging with the pad thai or the sound of the jazz concert or your muffin and coffee, you've become one with emptiness itself. As you merge with this, something else is happening to you that's very subtle at first and then dramatic as you continue. In the initial stages of meditating on emptiness, you feel nothing at all. For a certain period of time, you may find that it's somewhat deadening. You're going into this empty state, then you're out of the empty state, then you're back in the empty state. Some people find it refreshing; some people find it distressing. There are various responses to that emptiness, and people need to have enough commitment to the process to persist.

We in the West are familiar with the unconscious. But this differs in important ways from anything we might encounter in Freud or in Jung. It's important to recognize and say openly that our experiences on the cushion are going to be taking us farther and farther away from the understanding of the mind and the understanding of the self that are part of the standard model of Western thinking. I certainly don't want us to relinquish our critical faculties. But I do want us to pay attention to what actually happens on the cushion and the ways that that sometimes deviates from the expectations that are encouraged by our own culture.

For example, when you sit down on the cushion and you watch your breath, you discover something that's pretty remarkable, even though we don't think much about it. As you're watching your breath, you begin to distance yourself from your own thinking process. It's as though you're here and your thoughts are over there. We have been conditioned or educated to believe that we are our thoughts and our thoughts are the truest form of ourselves. But when thought begins to separate from self-awareness, when we can create that distance between our selves and our thinking process, our selves and ideas, that's actually rather radical. It's not the

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case that I think, therefore I am. There's thinking, and there's something else. There's some other kind of consciousness. Consciousness can stop self-referencing in ways that also challenge our traditional understanding of the mind and of the self. The idea that somehow consciousness can persist in the absence of self-referencing is a challenge to our understanding.

The idea that there's a core of consciousness that is not visible to our conscious mind but is somehow able to communicate with us is also a challenge to conventional models of consciousness. But if you practice Zen meditation, you're eventually going to reach a place where this seems self-evident to you. In fact, a lot of Zen practice is learning how to access this dynamic unconscious, which is actually Buddha mind itself. The idea is that at the core of our consciousness, at the core of our minds, there is this enlightened, compassionate radiant intelligence, which is big mind, Buddha mind, the *dharmakaya*, Buddha nature. This is accessible to us, but it's only accessible in a special way.

When we sit down on the cushion and enter emptiness, we're going to the door of this big mind. When we begin to encounter that energy on the cushion, that's a sign that the door is opening, and we access this big mind in this way. It's not the case that it communicates with us in words and ideas, but it communicates on a deeper level—you might say an intuitive level. When it does this, we learn how to trust its instruction of us. Zen practice involves finding this emptiness and dwelling in this emptiness. It's a little bit like a person who goes into a dark room from a lighted hallway. When you look around at first, it's absolutely black, but if you stay in that room, you begin to be able to operate. You began to be able to see. And it's not the case that you see visually when you stay in the big mind. But there's a form of communication. There's a relationship with your Buddha nature that you began to develop in this way. The conscious mind is always blind looking at the big mind. When you look at your *dharmakaya*, your enlightened mind, from the standpoint of the small mind, all you ever see as blankness, but you yourself are

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transformed in that encounter. The longer you stay at the door of the big mind, the more you're transformed.

How that happens is going to be the subject of the next conversation we have. But now I'd like to talk to you about what you can do on the cushion. My hope is that during the week, you've been able to move from watching the breath into that blankness. It may have only happened to you once or twice during the weekend. It may not have happened yet, and I hope you won't get discouraged. If you keep watching the breath and going to the end of the breath, you'll find this place which is blank. It may seem blank and dark or blank and a little bright. But you go there, at first just for a split second, and then you exit. Usually as you breathe out, you begin to enter that blankness, and then when you inhale, the thoughts start off again, and then you follow the breath out and you reach that interval of blankness, and then the thoughts start up again. You go through this process, and sometimes you don't find the interval of blankness, and sometimes you do. Sometimes on the cushion, you're just thinking about events of the day, and you never get there. But every time you get there, we Zen people believe it's deeply transformative.

Earlier, I spoke about the experience of samadhi of the breath, how when you go into the breath and the distance between yourself and the breath goes away, it produces this euphoric, grounded, expansive feeling of well-being. I said this is wonderful, but it's not enlightenment, and it's not actually advancing you on the path to enlightenment, although it's an essential step. If you decide to ride your bicycle and you ride your bicycle and you're in bicycle samadhi, that's wonderful. If you have Thai noodles and you go into Thai dinner samadhi, where you disappear into the flavor of Thai food, that's wonderful, but it's not inherently enlightening. But the Zen view is that the samadhi of emptiness is special. It's deeply purifying. In other words, it's loosening the hold that your *vasana* have over your experience of yourself and the world, and so every time you enter that emptiness, even if it's only for a split second, you're beginning to transform. You're

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beginning to liberate yourself. And if you practice in that spirit, I think you will make a lot of progress.

The first time you have a deep experience of emptiness, it might be a novelty, it might surprise you, but your attitude should be that this is really the door to Buddha. This is the door to Buddhahood, the door to Buddha mind. If you were able to get there this week, congratulations. Please just keep going back there. Every time you go back there, as I say, you're beginning to create a different set of mental habits for yourself, and it becomes easier and easier. So first week, one time; second week, two times; the third week, maybe you begin to get into that emptiness with some regularity. It may be somewhat shallow. It may be somewhat brief, but eventually it may be very deep.

Each time you're doing this, you're purifying body, mind, and word. You're beginning to undo the mental structures that hold all of us in bondage. So if you've been able to do that this week, please continue to do that. If you have been doing this for some time, you may begin to notice that there are what Master Mumon called "unconscious stirrings." You may begin to feel as you immerse yourself in that emptiness that it's not flat or lifeless emptiness. First of all, it's going to expand, it's going to become more capacious, and you're going to feel the vastness that underlies this great ocean of emptiness, but also you're going to begin to experience this energy. This is quite a difference between a samadhi of, say, watching the breath and the samadhi of mushin, the samadhi of emptiness, because when you get off the cushion and you're walking around during the day after you start doing the emptiness meditation, I'd like to suggest that you're going to feel differently, that it's going to carry over off the cushion as a kind of groundedness or centeredness that doesn't stop when you stop meditating. This is really the first indication of the deeply transformative character of empty mind.



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Please continue with the good work that you’ve been doing. When you’re off the cushion, go about your life. People will ask, “How can I integrate this into my life?” That’s actually a rather artificial undertaking. To try to drink a bowl of tea mindfully actually makes the act of drinking tea more self-conscious. So I would say spend your time on the cushion cultivating empty mind, and without trying to accomplish anything, I think you’ll find that off the cushion, there’s a new calm or a new clarity. You could call it a dispassion or an openness. It carries over off the cushion into your life in ways that are at first subtle and then very profound. So next week, we’re going to work on more active uses of emptiness, but right now, I hope you will continue to cultivate this empty mind and enjoy the process of purification. Thank you.