

Kurt Spellmeyer

*Meditating with Emptiness*

Week Three: “Dissolving Karmic Obstacles”

March 19, 2022



Hello, welcome back. This is the third in our four-part series on meditating with emptiness. You might remember that earlier, I was speaking about the problems of meditating in order to reach that calm, centered, peaceful place sometimes called *samadhi*. I’ve tried to make a case for the practice of the *samadhi* of emptiness, that is, entering a state of meditation in which we become one with the blank mind. And I’ve asked you over the last week to try to find that place and then stay in that place as often as you can. I know that it’s challenging, but one of the promises I made, and I’m sure you won’t be disappointed, is that if you practice emptiness meditation regularly, it will genuinely transform your life as it has transformed mine.

Just to make the point clear, I want to read something to you. This is from the *Heart Sutra*, a key Zen text about the meditation practice of emptiness. In this wonderful translation by the late Thich Nhat Hanh, Avalokiteshvara, or Kannon or Guan Yin, the bodhisattva of compassion, speaks: “Avalokiteshvara, while practicing deeply with insight that brings us to the other shore, suddenly discovered that all of the five *skandhas* are equally empty, and with this realization, he overcame all ill being. ‘Listen, Shariputra, this body itself is emptiness, and emptiness itself is this body. This body is not other than emptiness, and emptiness is not other than this body. The same is true of feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness. Listen, Shariputra, all phenomena bear the mark of emptiness. Their true nature is the nature of no birth, no death, no being, no nonbeing, no defilement, no purity, no increasing, no decreasing.’”

So you’re sold. You’re practicing emptiness meditation. You find yourself able to get into a place where when you look at your mind, it’s blank. And sometimes you’re able to immerse yourself in that blank mind, *mushin*, the mind of emptiness, so deeply perhaps that everything disappears, if only for a little while. It sometimes happens, especially if you practice in a prolonged way for multiple hours, that your absorption in that empty state will become so complete that you find yourself no longer paying attention to anything except that. There’s no sound, no sight, no taste, no touch. It’s like an ocean of emptiness. If that hasn’t happened to you, I urge you to keep

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practicing. Sooner or later, you may be awestruck by how deeply you can enter emptiness. And yet, no matter how deeply you enter emptiness, something is going to happen. Please don't be disappointed or deterred by it because it's important—and actually, it's liberating.

Let's say that you have been practicing diligently. You've been sitting every day, and every once in a while you can get into a state of absorption in that empty state so complete that everything disappears. You're sitting there in that empty state, and all of a sudden, you start thinking about some problems at work, and the more you try to return to the empty state, the more insistent your engagement with those problems becomes. Or you're sitting in that empty state, and suddenly you notice that your legs hurt, and you try to push it aside, but your legs continue to hurt. Or you're sitting in that empty state and a garbage truck goes down the street, and you find yourself getting angry and frustrated because that garbage truck has pulled you out of your empty mind.

Now, in all of those cases, it's possible to say to yourself, “Oh, I'm failing at emptiness meditation.” But you're not failing. The matter is a little more complex than my explanation last time might have made it seem. When you practice emptiness meditation in this way, the purpose is not actually for you to remain in a sustained state of emptiness forever. In fact, if you could enter a sustained state of emptiness forever, you would never wake up. It's important to realize that when the Buddha left home and went to study meditation with several of the leading meditation teachers of his time, he learned the practice of emptiness meditation, but he left that sangha, that community, because he understood that emptiness meditation by itself doesn't liberate. There are actually people who believe that if you can enter emptiness, a state of absolute cessation of all inputs and all outputs, you are free, you're released. That is not indeed what the Buddha concluded from his own practice. So he left his teachers and went off on his own. We Zen people have a belief about how he woke up, which doesn't actually turn up in all the literature. It's more or less something we Zen people tend to believe. Our belief is that Lord Shakyamuni, the Buddha, the World-Honored One, was meditating in the deepest possible

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emptiness, and in that emptiness, there was no longer any recognition of time or any recognition of space. There was no longer even the consciousness of being conscious. And then from that state of the deepest possible emptiness, he returned to the world of form. We believe that the World-Honored One looked up and saw the morning star, and when he saw the morning star, he became awake. This is an extremely important representation of how emptiness meditation is supposed to work. In other words, it's not just about staying in emptiness. You could say it's a kind of dialogue, moving back and forth from emptiness into the world of form into emptiness into the world of form.

Now, there's another complication that I have to mention. You may recall that I introduced the metaphor of the two screens: the screen behind your eyes, which is the mental processing that goes on behind our sensory awareness, and the screen in front of your eyes, which takes in the world around us as it's unfolding, which is what we call the real world. The screen behind our eyes is always coloring how we experience the world out here. I used the example of coming home from work having had a bad experience with your boss that's left you frustrated or angry. You get out of the car, and the dog rushes up to show his love to you. You yell at the dog, and then you're filled with regret and puzzled as to why you would yell at your beloved dog. I said that what was happening is that behind your eyes, there's a movie of your boss giving you a hard time, and that's playing all the time as you drive home. You get out of your car, you see your dog, and it's still playing. It colors your responses to the dog in front of you and to the events in front of you. Maybe somebody cuts you off and you get angry. You're really not angry at that person; you're angry at your boss.

When we sit down on the cushion and we enter *mushin*, or empty mind, what happens temporarily is that the screen out here still has something going on. Our eyes might be half closed. Maybe we feel cold on our face. Maybe our bodily sensations become very attenuated, and the screen behind our eyes is blank and dark for a while. But then what begins to happen is

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that something starts coming up. It could be just an awareness of ambient sound. It could be a memory of something that has happened recently. And even though we've been in that deep emptiness, it may become more and more insistent that we may feel that we've failed at this game. But that's not true. We Zen people also believe something else, which is that at the core of our consciousness is enlightened mind itself, Buddha nature itself, the *dharmakaya*. It's at the core of our consciousness, but our *vasana*, our karma, our mental habits, obscure or obstruct it. So when we sit down on the cushion and we enter emptiness, we're clearing that screen temporarily, but we haven't cleared it entirely even if we see nothing there. You could say that the deeper layers of our mind below the threshold of immediate consciousness still contain a record or the karmic residue of our past experience, often unacknowledged and unprocessed.

So I sit down on the cushion, I watch my breath, I enter mushin, the screen behind my eyes goes blank, and I open my eyes. I may feel very connected, very alive, and all of those good things that I discussed last time. But then the thoughts start coming up. Perhaps, during the day, I had an argument with my teenage daughter, and I left the argument in a rage or crying with frustration—not that that ever happens, of course, but let's say that it has. I decide I'm so frustrated, I'm so angry, I don't trust myself to respond to my daughter right now. I'm going to go meditate.

So you sit down on the cushion. Because you've been practicing and you've trained yourself, you enter deep mushin, and you have that experience of being set free. All that anger goes away. But it doesn't stay away. As you're sitting, it comes back. You could say, “I'm failing at this, I'm not managing to stay in emptiness.” But actually, that would be as detrimental to you as staying in samadhi. You have to go from emptiness back into the world of form. In this case, going from emptiness back into the world of form means confronting these *vasana*, these karmic obstacles. So as you're sitting on the cushion, enjoying the calm, you begin to replay the events of the afternoon. One's impulse is to say, “I have to get rid of this, I have to ignore this.” Please don't

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do that. Because what we Zen people call the big mind, or your enlightened mind, is actually helping you to wake up. Please believe this, and please practice in this spirit. The big mind, the deep, unconscious mind, the enlightened mind inside yourself is actually trying to help you wake up all the time. We're blocking it. We're interfering with it a lot of the time, but it's really trying to help us wake up all the time. So when you're sitting on the cushion, and you start thinking about your argument with your daughter, instead of saying, “I shouldn't be experiencing this,” realize that your big mind wants you to deal with this and work this through.

I've been teaching Zen for a long time, and I have worked primarily with students who are doing koans, which I'll say more about later. Students will be given a koan, and they'll be working on the koan for many days. We do this at retreats where we meditate for eight hours a day. So the student is working on this koan for eight hours a day. One example of a koan is a famous Zen teacher came into the Zen hall and said to his students, “If you have a staff, I will give you one. If you have no staff, I will take it away.” Students meditate on that koan by internalizing what we call a turning phrase or turning word. So in this case, you're sitting down on the cushion, and you say “give” on one out-breath and then “take” on the next out-breath, “give” on one out-breath, “take” on the next out-breath. You internalize this, and at first, nothing's happening. But after a while, something begins to come up, something connected to your deeper karma, your vasana. Students will come into the dokusan room, and I'll say, “How's it going with your koan?” They'll say, “Nothing's happening.” “What do you mean nothing?” I say. “Oh, I'm trying to focus on my koan, but I keep thinking about my relationship with my brother, or I keep thinking about that car crash I had 15 years ago.” Something *is* happening. They're just not accepting it.

When you sit down on the cushion and you try to stay in that emptiness, your big mind is sending you a message. It's saying, “You need to work this through. You need to deal with this.” If you don't, it goes into the storehouse of karma. The storehouse of karma is an ancient way of

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conceptualizing this. If Buddha nature is your core consciousness, Buddha nature itself is encrusted or covered over with your karma, your vasana, and all the vasana that have been karmically important to you are stored in your storehouse consciousness, which is this layer over the enlightened mind. So we have to remove all those layers of karma in order to let our enlightened nature shine through, and this is part of that work.

So you're sitting on the cushion, you're watching your breath placidly, you enter deep emptiness, and then you start replaying the scene, and you begin to have powerful emotions, maybe emotions that you didn't permit yourself to recognize while they were happening because you were too upset. You see and feel your anger, your frustration, your fear of failing, your fear of being a bad parent, your disappointment with your daughter, your disappointment with yourself, and so on, and all of this triggers emotional responses. Our inclination, of course, is to return to that placid state. But that's actually in some ways the worst thing you can do. It's not going to work. What you need to do instead is to just sit with those emotions as a kind of neutral witness to all of this. So you're angry, you're fearful, you feel like you've failed, you're afraid of being a bad parent. It's all coming out, and you're just accepting it in the spirit of, "This is helping me wake up. The big mind is asking me to address this."

And how do you address it? How do you work it through? You go into deep samadhi, into mushin, and as this stuff comes up, you allow yourself to be present with it in a nonjudgmental way, and that dialogue with emptiness keeps unfolding. You see the scene, you feel the emotions, you go into emptiness; you see the scene, you feel the emotions, you go into emptiness, and so on. But after a while, something happens that's really quite wonderful. No matter how much this has gripped you, no matter how much emotional distress this has caused you, it may take more than one sitting session, but eventually you're going to be sitting on the cushion, and you replay the events of the day, and all of these conditioned responses will be gone. It's as though you have now left all of those responses behind, and you're just observing what happened, and what

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happened is what happened. Let's say I had an argument with my teenage daughter. I was upset because she made a decision without consulting me. I felt violated. I felt worried and betrayed. You see all of that, and you are able to understand that this just happened, and your heart-mind is calm and placid. When you get off the cushion, you no longer feel tense and tight and threatened. You feel connected, alive, expansive.

But there's one other aspect of this breakthrough that is quite important. We imagine enlightenment as a kind of complete transcendence that removes us from the whole register of human emotions and responses, and that's not quite true. Even though the Buddha sees the world without karmic residue—the Buddha is *anuttara-samyak-sambodhi*, enlightened without any karmic residue whatsoever—nevertheless, he feels this overwhelming compassion. And actually, that happens to us, just like to the Buddha. We sit down on the cushion, we work through our issues, we feel this tremendous sense of release or liberation, we open our eyes, we walk outside, everything seems so alive. And when we revisit the argument with our daughter and see her face in our minds, we just feel this deep, unqualified compassion and love, and we feel for ourselves. This is the process: entering the mind of neutral witnessing and then experiencing compassion. And this is a practice that sooner or later will completely clear away all your vasana, all your karmic residue, all your karmic accumulations. Before that happens, you may have a kind of decisive event that I'd like to talk about next time. But once you've gone through that experience, all is not over. You have to go through this experience again and again. The practice of emptiness meditation is to go from emptiness to the morning star back into emptiness to the morning star, and every time we try to be present with the morning star, there's something in our way. There's something in our way, and that something is our karma.

You don't have to live in a temple. You don't have to wear robes or be a monk or a nun. But you do need to practice regularly. You can make your emptiness practice more or less what I just described using the challenges of your actual life. In any particular day, or certainly in any

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particular week, there's something that has been sit-worthy about the week, something that's troubling us or causing us to withdraw from the world around us, to become defensive, or to close down on our awareness. When that happens, we need to sit. The more you sit, the better—within reason. You make a practice of doing zazen and entering that emptiness, and then something is going to come up. Your big mind is going to call your attention to something. It may not need much help. It may just be there. But when it happens, you need to understand, “This is a gift from my big mind. I need to work this through, no matter how challenging it is,” and you work it through and you have that clarity and then you do it the next day and you do it the next day. I highly recommend this practice, and I hope you'll give that a try. You may not be able to reach the kind of clarity and emptiness that you had before this came up for a number of sits, but this is the work. Meditation is a kind of work. I think it's the most important work you will ever do. I feel that the liberation this provides is far superior to the momentary release from suffering that is achieved through simply sitting in samadhi.

I'd like to say a little bit more, though, about koan meditation because koan meditation is rather different from the kind of meditation I just described. It's also emptiness meditation, but it's emptiness meditation of a rather different kind. Instead of using your everyday experiences—the arguments with your daughter, the problems on the job—to work through your conditioned responses, your karma, koans operate as subliminal cues that you internalize and that begin to bring to the surface unacknowledged obstacles that might not come to the surface if we just relied on the accidents of our life. In my experience, this is a very effective way to clear away our obstacles. Koans usually involve some kind of a story or question that the teacher will give you, and these generally involve some kind of contradiction. I mentioned earlier, “If you have a staff, I will give you one. If you have no staff, I will take it away.”

You can try to treat the koan as a conundrum or brain teaser—maybe it's saying don't expect to be rewarded or do with less. But that's not really what it's about. It's really this subconscious or



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subliminal cue. It's triggering and activating your big mind. I sometimes say a koan operates like a magic stone you throw into a well. The well is your mind. It's blank and dark. When you look down there, you throw this stone in, the turning phrase of the koan, and it sinks and nothing seems to be happening, and then all of a sudden, something starts bubbling to the surface. And that's how koans work. You internalize the turning phrase of the koan—with the koan we've been discussing, “If you have a staff, I will give you one. If you have no staff, I will take it away.” You might be meditating on that for weeks or even months. You might be waiting for a flash of light or the ground to move under your cushion, and it does sometimes happen like that. But often what happens instead is you find yourself thinking about your relationship with your parents, and if you're training with a teacher, you might go to see the teacher and say, “I'm not making any progress on my koan. I keep thinking about my relationship with my parents.” But of course in this case too, the big mind is trying to get you to see something. As you sit, you begin to recall many exchanges with your parents in which it was clear to you in a way you didn't consciously acknowledge that they loved your sister more than they loved you. They said, “Oh, we love you both equally,” but in every possible way, they showed that they loved your sister more. This is something you've never admitted even to yourself. You've said “Oh no, I had a happy family. My parents were so loving. They treated me and my sister so well.” Now you suddenly realize, “No, they were so unkind to me. They didn't give me the love I needed. They lavished it on my sister.” Again, you go through this process. It's like these emotions that you may have lived through (and may not have allowed yourself to live through) emerge, and you need to be the neutral witness. You need to sit with this as it all comes up, and you experience the pain, you experience suffering, but you keep coming back into emptiness and gradually it clears away. At the end of this process too, you can say, “This is what actually happened,” and the conditioned responses are gone, and the affective dimension is gone except for the presence of this unqualified compassion.

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This happens little by little. It's sometimes compared to water dropping on a rock. Huge boulders are blown away by little trickles of water. The Grand Canyon was made by a small stream over time. We keep working through our obstacles one obstacle a day or one obstacle a week. But little by little, we're radically transformed. We become open people. The clearer the screen behind our eyes, the brighter the screen in front of our eyes. It's not a process we can control. You can do a lot of meditation, and you can say, “Well, I've been meditating every day for 10 years, and I still haven't had my great awakening experience. I still haven't had this experience of the screen behind my eyes suddenly becoming transparent and seeing the mind's core, the dharmakaya face to face. I haven't had that experience. Why not? I followed your advice.”

The timetable is not yours. It's the big mind's timetable. To practice emptiness meditation is to put this practice of emptiness at the center of your life, but it's also to trust in the big mind. The big mind has a wisdom and an understanding that we don't have. That's a fact. So we trust the big mind because it has never let us down. It's constantly helped us to see what we need to see and work through what we need to work through, and little by little, we get closer and closer to it. As we get closer and closer to it, we develop two qualities that I can't emphasize highly enough. One is patience. I remember my first teacher, Takabayashi Genki Roshi, at a sesshin, during a period of meditation, around 25 people were all struggling with their koans, and people were going in to meet the teacher and nobody was able to work through their koan. They were all blocked. Genki Roshi came out, and he sat down on the cushion. He said, “Well, if you learn nothing else from Zen, you learn patience.” Everybody burst into laughter. Nobody got it. He meant that this is so important.

Patience is so important because patience is related to the second quality I want to recommend, and that is trust, or the trusting mind. To practice this way is to trust the big mind unconditionally. So if it takes five years to wake up, that's fine. If it takes 10 years, if it takes 20

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lifetimes, that's fine. The sutras say the Buddha spent countless lifetimes in selfless service to humanity before he became the Buddha, so 20 years is not so much.

This is the task for this week. I would like you to practice. I would like you to allow things to come up on the cushion as you're sitting in emptiness. When these things come up, please don't try to think them through. The point is not to achieve an intellectual solution because there are no intellectual solutions to these problems. There are intellectual solutions to a bridge over the Delaware River, and there are intellectual solutions to questions of general linguistics, but there's no intellectual response to the fact that your parents didn't love you or that your brother died of cancer or any other problem that has left its mark and closed you down and prevented you from being fully open in the world. It's very important not to process in an intellectual mode, in a thinking, discriminating mode, but to sit with that blank mind, allow this to arise, and then return to the blankness. That dialogue with emptiness is key to this path.

Please begin to engage in that dialogue with emptiness. You don't need a koan. Life has probably already given you more than enough koans. If one comes up and returns and returns and returns, it's probably significant. If it comes up once and it goes away and something else comes up, just keep sorting through. It's like emptying this big sack. You don't know what's in there, but you have to just keep emptying it. If something comes up repeatedly, though, that's karmically significant. As it keeps coming up repeatedly, allow it to be present with you. Sit as the silent witness, and let it take you. Koans don't have an answer. That's a colossal misunderstanding. Koans take you on a journey. There isn't one right answer to any koan, no matter what people say. Koans take you through the process I described: emptiness, encounter with the vasana, encounter with the karma, engagement with the karma, working through, clarity and compassion. That's the process. So trust the big mind to do all the work. All you have to do is be present, and the big mind is going to take care of everything else. It's going to give you the problem, it's

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going to solve the problem for you, and then it's going to let you enjoy the afternoon. So I hope you enjoy this afternoon, and I look forward very much to seeing you next week. Thank you.