

## Silent Illumination

By Guo Gu



“Silent Illumination,” or *mozhao*, is often associated with the Caodong (Jp. Soto) School of Chan (Jp. Zen), and specifically with master Hongzhi Zhengjue (1091-1157). Never before had anyone articulated this teaching so clearly. Hongzhi was prompted to write about Silent Illumination because it was so misunderstood and unfairly criticized. He wished to show that Silent Illumination was the realization of Chan, the awakening of one’s true nature. In Buddhism, there may be different expressions for this realization, but the taste of awakening is the same.

What, then, is this silence? Silence refers to the fact that we are originally free from all narratives and constructs of self. Mind precedes everything; it is the precursor to experience. So in understanding the nature of mind and gaining insight, you see that all things are impermanent, all things have no abidance, and are intimately connected. That is the realization of no-self, selflessness. This true nature of our mind is free from the coming and going of fragmented, scattered, discriminating thoughts. Just try to be angry 24/7. You can’t! Intrinsically—by nature—anger is empty. These thoughts and passing emotions liberate themselves moment after moment after moment. You don’t have to do anything to make them to disappear. I often give the analogy

that this room we're in—its spaciousness—is really not affected by all the furniture and the people in it. The nature of the room, the space contained within—is it affected by how dirty or how clean the room happens to be? No, the room itself is not affected. Similarly, even in the midst of vexations/emotional afflictions (Skt., *kleśas*), the true nature of your mind is and has always been empty and free of disturbance. Because of this intrinsically empty nature, it is called “silence.” It's not something that we gain from the outside. If awakening is gained from the outside, then it would just be an additional piece of furniture; it would be subject to gain and loss, having and not having.

What is “illumination”? It is the natural functioning of the mind and its openness. How is this related to silence? It is because of this intrinsic, empty nature that the natural function of the mind is possible. In other words, the original spaciousness of the room allows the accommodation of any kind of furniture. Emptiness has a natural function. What is it? Openness—the dynamic ability to change, accommodate, and liberate itself. In Chan, we call this wisdom, illumination, or *prajñā*. So Silent Illumination is only a metaphor for this inseparability of the empty nature and its function.

Illumination as this natural function of wisdom responds to the needs of sentient beings, and does so without fixation, self-important rigidity, self-referentiality, self-grasping. It's a natural response, like a reflection in a mirror. The mirror doesn't say, “Hey, I'm reflecting.” Nor does the mirror retain the image it once reflected. If it retained fixed images from the past, one image will be superimposed over the other and the whole thing would be a mess, confusing. The natural function of wisdom is free, dynamic, quite alive, and leaves no trace. Traces of images and what came before—that is the discriminating mind and emotional afflictions—the sense of self, the stories we tell ourselves, the self-narratives, and the establishment of self-image. All of this is analogous to the furniture in the room. Not the true nature. Is this bad? No. It is a matter of perspective: Enlightened, the working of our mind is called selfless wisdom; deluded, the mind's activities constitute self-referential vexations.

Most people are habitually attached to their furniture or constructs of self. Because of this, they cause themselves a myriad of problems. If their self-narrative happens to be negative, deriving from early trauma, or from sickness, it feeds into more vexations. If the self-narrative is positive, attachment arises, and people may overestimate themselves and inadvertently cause themselves and others harm. Yet, all things change; nothing is fixed. There is only infinite possibility, infinite potential. I have students with so-called ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder) and PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder) who can testify to this. Through practice, they gradually ease up on medication until it is no longer needed. Why? Because, originally, all such “illnesses” were not present. That said, habitual attachments run deep. They give us a deeply ingrained sense of identity. This is why practice is necessary. It is not that we deny our past experiences, but we don't have to be defined by them.



## The Practice of Silent Illumination

Technically speaking, Silent Illumination is not a method of practice. It is actually the state of awakening, which is our true nature—the freedom that belongs to each and every one of you. It is only due to habitual attachment to dualistic thinking and self-referential feelings that this intrinsic awakened state is temporarily concealed. Our true nature has nothing to do with gaining or losing, having or not having. Silent Illumination is merely a metaphor for this direct realization. Despite the fact that we are intrinsically awakened, practice is still necessary. Why? Practice deals with removing the obscurations that conceal our true nature. In this sense, Silent Illumination entails this practical dimension. Yet, practice must be in accordance with the correct view that we lack nothing; that we are originally free.

Silent Illumination as a metaphor plays off of very traditional systems of meditation: *śamatha* and *vipaśyanā* or calming and insight (Pāli, *samatha* and *vipassanā*). All Buddhist meditation can be subsumed under these two classifications. Traditionally, these are practiced sequentially, or in tandem, in order to remove the obscurations of the mind. That is, first, through concentration and calming with the five methods of stilling the mind, you stabilize the mind. Then, you try to gain insight into the nature of mind through the four foundations of mindfulness. You can't have insight into the nature of reality, the nature of who you are, if the mind is scattered. It is like a candle—only a steady flame will illuminate a room clearly. If the flame flickers, whatever is seen is fuzzy or unclear at best. So Silent Illumination, as a practice, may be understood in terms of *śamatha* and *vipaśyana*, or calming and insight.

Yet, it's not quite like the traditional sense of *śamatha* and *vipaśyana*, which are practiced sequentially. The Chan tradition advocates simultaneous practice of the two. This is the difficulty

and that is why Silent Illumination is an advanced practice. Traditionally, *śamatha* or calming leads to *samādhi* (Pāli, *jhāna*; Skt. *dhyāna*) or meditative absorption; *vipāśyana* leads to *prajñā* or wisdom. In Chan these ideas are expanded. In the *Platform Sutra*, a text attributed to the sixth lineage master of the Chan school, Huineng (638-713) says:

*Calming is the essence of wisdom. And wisdom is the natural function of calming [i.e., prajñā and samādhi]. At the time of prajñā, samādhi exists in that. At the time of samādhi, prajñā exists in that. How is it that samādhi and prajñā are equivalent? It is like the light of the lamp. When the lamp exists, there is light. When there is no lamp, there is darkness. The lamp is the essence of light. The light is the natural function of the lamp. Although their names are different, in essence, they are fundamentally identical. The teaching of samādhi and prajñā is just like this.*

This means that the true nature of *samādhi* or calm is really the nature of emptiness. In my analogy of the room, this refers to intrinsic empty spaciousness. Originally there is no furniture, no features, just openness. Is it spacious because it is without furniture? No. The furniture reveals the empty nature of the room. This is like the *Platform Sutra*'s analogy of the light of the lamp, whose function is to illuminate.

The inseparable essence and function of the mind applies to practice. Our mind has two interrelated qualities: it is empty and aware. Mind has no fixed forms. Despite this fact—actually because of the freedom of no fixed forms—the mind is able to learn, to be aware, and this awareness is always present. Even when you have wandering thoughts, even when you dream, awareness is there. It is just that most of the time we're ensnared in the mind's content. But it is hard to be aware of this, so the mind must be calmed to recognize this awareness. Once it is refined, it can be quite clear, luminous, and radiant.

So how is the practice of Silent Illumination done? The practice is done in accordance with this understanding as the correct view. In sitting meditation the practitioner does not try to gain or get rid of anything—no need to shuffle the furniture around in the room. Just be aware of the naturalness of each wakeful moment. Yet in embarking on this practice, we usually find that we need to hold onto something, because of our conditioning. So we need something more concrete than just being wakeful, and not allowing the mind to abide or fixate anywhere. Otherwise, this trying to be wakeful can become an abstract idea, or you may start to take the stillness or clarity as an object of meditation. Very simply put: just be in the stream of this act of sitting, the concrete experience of sitting.

You're not trying to contemplate the breath; you're not trying to meditate on something; and your body and mind are not objects of meditation. You are just with your body, in your body sitting. Body and mind are one. Simplify and reduce all complications to this single act of just sitting. However, if you're too absorbed or scattered and are no longer aware that you're sitting, then bring it back to this concrete act of sitting again. Now, how do you know you're sitting? You have your sitting posture, your feeling of being here, the presence of the body. Just restfully be with the simplicity of here, sitting.

Naturally when the mind calms down and concentration develops, it will generate *samādhi*. This is due to a lopsidedness of concentration over natural awareness. Your natural awareness will

become overpowered by the momentum of a concentrated mind. In other words, too much *śamatha*—leads to an imbalance in *vipaśyanā*. At this point, depending on the strength of *śamatha*, you may experience different levels of *samādhi* or *jhāna*. So the experiences presented in the article, “You are Already Enlightened,” published in the winter 2012 issue of *Buddhadharma* magazine, describe these states. I will not elaborate on these here. Suffice it to say that, as I have stated in the article, these levels or stages are really the result of a lopsided practice. It’s not that these experiences are good or bad. It’s just that this is what happens when there’s an imbalance of *śamatha* and *vipaśyanā*. In other words, it is what happens when one is not practicing them simultaneously.

Another caveat is not to take the silence, stillness, or even clarity, as an object of meditation. This is a subtle form of fixation that practitioners can easily slip into, and it usually happens to advanced practitioners. At best, one enters into *samādhi*; otherwise, one simply dwells in what is called the “ghost cave on the dark side of the mountain.” This is like soaking a rock in cold water—nothing happens even after a hundred years! This means vexations and delusions remain—usually wandering thoughts are still there as well—it’s just that we are quiet and at peace. This is not awakening. It is merely more “furniture” in the room—not the room itself. Our mind is habituated into grasping something; it can easily take an experience and objectify it. As soon as we do that, we have made Silent Illumination a dead thing. Practitioners in this situation really need the help of a skillful teacher; otherwise they can be self-satisfied and think they have nothing to do. When they encounter big karmic obstructions or vexations, their practice and so-called “attainment” will crumble, leaving them in great uncertainty about buddhadharma or in a state of self-disparagement.

The true practice of Silent Illumination has no stages. The practitioner rests in moment-to-moment wakefulness—the reality of the here. It is the most natural, the most normal state of mind, yet without scattered thoughts and delusion. If you don’t wander off somewhere, the mind is in its natural state and has no center. The mind is pure. Self-referential discriminations and emotional afflictions drop off of their own accord. The key is clear, nonattachment. Scattered, wandering thoughts arise from grasping and habitual tendencies. When the practitioner is truly free from grasping, there are no wandering and habitual tendencies. This is the practice of Silent Illumination. It may be difficult at first, so the practitioner has to gain some level of focus and clarity as a foundation before using this method. However, because the practitioner does not fabricate or construct anything, and yet cultivates an open wakeful mind, practice becomes natural.

Are there any “stages” to this genuine practice of Silent Illumination? No. Just like there are no levels to the spaciousness of this room in relation to the furniture and there are no stages to speak about when the mirror reflects images. It is in accord with the most natural, pure, liberated mind—the awakened mind. However, are you enlightened? No. The difference is like a clear window and no window or walls at all. A clear window allows one to see outside clearly, but something is still there. With the personal experience of awakening, the window is gone. Until then, is the practice useful? Yes. You are less likely to be pushed and pulled by your vexations. Instead you see the mechanism of grasping clearly. In this course of practice, there will be many experiences; some will seem liberating and special, but do not grasp on to this “furniture.” If you are

interested in the different experiences or signposts that may arise in practice, you may refer to my earlier article “You Are Already Enlightened.”



### **Textual References of Silent Illumination**

The Chan practice of Silent Illumination is called the “sudden path.” Why sudden? Because awakening is not gained from the outside. That is, our innate awakening is not the “result” of practice. It is not produced and it cannot be lost. It’s just like the spaciousness of the room accommodating furniture and the mirror reflecting images—that’s how sudden it is. Sudden has nothing to do with time. It’s not that we start practicing Chan and, maybe in a few hours you’ll become enlightened. It is sudden because there’s no gap; it is the very ground of your being; it is the path that you travel; it is also the fruit of your realization. The path, the fruit, exist because of the very ground of your being. Your mind is intrinsically awakened. That’s why it’s sudden. As for actual practice of seeing through obscurations, that takes a long time!

Is there scriptural basis for Silent Illumination and the sudden path in the early Buddhist canon (i.e., the Pāli *Nikāyas* and the Skt. *Āgamas*)? Yes, in several places. It also appears in the *Vinaya*—stories of how the monastic regulations came into place. Here I would like to stress the unity of different Buddhist traditions because there is a tendency among practitioners of one tradition of Buddhism to judge other traditions based on their own limited understanding. For example, one may think that in order to legitimate a particular teaching, it must be found in the “early *Nikāyas*.” But little do these people know that the early Buddhist canon can only be dated concretely to fifth-century CE. In fact, all scriptures, including the Mahāyāna, were only committed to written text no earlier than the first century BCE. In other words, the so-called “early” and “later” scriptures were written down around the same time.

From BCE times to later fifth-sixth centuries in India, there were many terms used to refer to Buddhadharmā, such as *bodhisattvayāna*, *tathāgatayāna*, *agrayāna*, and *ekayāna*, etc. (Walser 2009, 219). There were many interpretations of Buddhadharmā. Some of these traditions of early Buddhism proposed different teachings about the nature of Buddhahood, mental continuum, existence of self, and experience of no-self. Some of these teachings can be seen as antecedents to Mahāyāna Buddhism. After the Buddha's passing there developed eighteen different schools within Buddhism. The Theravāda, which traces itself back to the Vibhajjavādins, is also only one of these schools. It was by no means the authoritative tradition after the Buddha's passing. There were periods in which different schools' views dominated the interpretation of the Buddha's teaching. We have fragmented teachings from several of these schools, such as the Sarvastivādins, the Mahāsāṃghikas, and the Vāstīputrīyas. It is only a historical accident that the Theravādin Buddhist canon survives today.

At the time of the emergence of the Mahāyāna scriptures in ancient India, members of the Sangha who were sympathetic to these teachings followed their interest while remaining within the existing schools of Buddhism and continued to live alongside monks and nuns who did not share their interests. Many of the so-called founders of the Mahāyāna, such as Nāgārjuna and the two brothers Asanga and Vasubandhu, were ordained in the Mahāsāṃghika and Sarvastivāda schools respectively. Also, early Chinese monk pilgrims who traveled to and lived in India and South Asia between the fourth to the eighth centuries CE report that basically there were only different proclivities and personal preferences within the Buddhist Sangha—some monastics gravitated to one corpus of scriptures, while others gravitated to another—they lived under the same roof.

The term Mahāyāna did not refer to a single set of doctrines, practices, or propositions in India. The polarity between Hinayāna and Mahāyāna is a later development, more the result of Chinese and Tibetan forms of Buddhism. This is because they were influenced by certain later-developed Mahāyāna scriptures that ridicule notions of Hinayāna. As far as Indian Buddhism is concerned, as stated above, this divide between Hinayāna and Mahāyāna as a social phenomenon never developed. If we examine early Mahāyāna scriptures, even though the focus is on the *bodhisattva* ideal—the aspiration to save all beings and attain buddhahood—the actual practices advocated therein were actually the same as those of the early scriptures. Even in later Indian Mahāyāna texts, there is ample evidence that the notion of Hinayāna remains an abstract prescriptive concept as opposed to descriptive reality of how practitioners actually practiced on the ground. The important point is that irrespective of what tradition one belongs to, there's great coherence to all traditions of Buddhism. While interpretations vary, and a certain tradition may focus on some aspects of the buddhadharma, the taste of liberation is the same. Below I will only cite the sutras (Pāli, *suttas*) and not limit myself to the commentarial traditions since they can vary greatly.

In terms of early sources for the sudden path or sudden illumination, we see that the Buddha often welcomed people who come to the teachings for the first time with a simple expression of “Welcome, monk!” and often upon just hearing these words these people would suddenly attain arhatship, i.e., realize liberation. This suddenness of the mind's ability to transform and grasp the nature of reality is mentioned in the *Lahurparivatta Sutta* (*Anguttara Nikāya* 1.48. PTS: A i 10 I, v, 8), wherein the Buddha states that there is not:

*a single thing that is as quick to reverse itself as the mind—so much so that there is no feasible simile for how quick to reverse itself it is. (Thanissaro Bhikkhu, 2006)*

Reverse from what? From delusion to enlightenment. Why? Because you're intrinsically awakened! The mind is originally pure from delusion, and that all the "furniture" has absolutely no effect on the nature of the spaciousness of the room. The Buddha states in the *Pabhassara Sutta* (*Anguttara Nikāya* 1.49-52. PTS: A i 10) that:

*Luminous, monks, is the mind. It is defiled [only] by incoming defilements. Luminous, monks, is the mind. It is [intrinsically] freed from incoming defilements. Luminous, monks, is the mind. It is defiled [only] by incoming defilements. The uninstructed run-of-the-mill person does not discern that as it actually is present, which is why I tell you that—for the uninstructed run-of-the-mill person—there is no development of the mind. Luminous, monks, is the mind. And it is [intrinsically] freed from incoming defilements. The well-instructed disciple of the noble ones discerns the mind as it actually is, which is why I tell you that—for the well-instructed disciple of the noble ones—there is development of the mind. (Emphasis mine; Thanissaro Bhikkhu, 1995)*

Here, luminous mind refers to our intrinsic awakened mind—that is, the original spaciousness of the room. All vexations are only temporary; they will come and go; their ability to come and go points to the natural functioning of the awakened mind. Enlightened to the intrinsic luminous nature of the mind, our mental processes are the function of selfless wisdom; deluded, they are naturally displayed in the form of vexations. If a person can realize the mind as it is, he will instantaneously be free. As the Buddha states, so sudden that "there is no feasible simile for it."

In the early *Verses of the Eldresses* or *Therīgāthā*, which are a collection of songs of awakening by early Buddhist nuns, there is a story of a nun Patācarā, who joined the Sangha after suffering the loss of her entire family and almost going insane. She practiced so diligently, but was still agitated about not being able to enter the dharma—until one evening. Her verse of awakening:

*Ploughing their fields, sowing seeds in the earth, men look after their wives and children, and prosper.*

*Why can't I, who keep the precepts and follow the teachings of the Master, attain nirvāna?  
I am neither lazy nor conceited!*

*After washing my feet, I note the water, and watched it going down the drain; that makes me collect and control my mind as though it were a noble thoroughbred horse.*

*Then taking a lamp, I enter my cell; thinking of going to sleep, I sit down on my bed;*

*With a pin, I pull out the wick. The lamp goes out: nirvāna. My mind is freed.  
(Oldenberg and Pischel 1883, 134-35)*

Just as the lamp was extinguished, Patācarā's vexations suddenly extinguished. In the case of Patācarā, her awakening was powerful enough to liberate her completely. In other cases, practitioners usually experience a glimpse of awakening, or *nirvāna*, and would require

continued practice and experience of awakening again and again. Nevertheless, it is important to note that Patācarā's mind was agitated right up to that point of liberation. She only calmed her mind for a very brief moment, watching the bathwater drain out, before her insight. How can this be so? Because awakening is a path of sudden recognition, not the path of purification. Purification deals with practice and vexations. Awakening, on the other hand, is always sudden, and has little to do with practice. That is to say, whether there's furniture or not, the room is intrinsically empty, spacious. It takes an instant to recognize this intrinsic freedom. Only if the awakening is not powerful enough does it require subsequent practice, or purification.

As for Silent Illumination, the *Yuganaddha Sutta* (*Anguttara Nikāya* 4.170) states that liberation is attained through a variation of four possible scenarios in realizing calming and insight (*śamatha* and *vipaśyanā*): developing insight preceded by calming; developing calm preceded by insight; developing calm and insight in tandem; and an obscure situation where a person who is agitated by not understanding the dharma can on his own suddenly gain an entry into the calm and insight, leading to liberation. The passage states:

*Then there is the case where a monk's mind is seized by agitation about the teaching. But there comes a time when his mind becomes internally steadied, composed, unified, and concentrated; then the path (suddenly) arises in him. He now pursues, develops, and cultivates that path, and while he is doing so the fetters are abandoned and the underlying tendencies eliminated. (Emphasis mine; Bhikkhu Bodhi 2005, 268)*

Usually the Theravada commentarial tradition has difficulty with this passage on the fourth type of practitioner. Why? Because sudden entry into the path has no place in the orthodox interpretation of the Theravada tradition, which is bound by the view of gradual, sequential practice and cultivation of calming and insight. As stated above, this tradition in the form that we know today developed quite late, in the fifth-century, through figures such as Buddhaghosa (Gethin 1998, 42, 55). However, it is possible to experience an instantaneous alignment of calming and insight—the most natural state of being where the mind is steady and receptive to insight.

If we temporarily put aside the Theravada commentarial tradition and just focus on the scriptures, we see that there is plenty of evidence for the precedence of the sudden path of Chan. For example, in the case of Cudapanthaka (Pāli, Culapanthaka), he had a very low intelligence and couldn't remember anything. He followed his older brother Mahāpanthaka into the Sangha to become a monk. His brother was bright, and soon gained entry into the buddhadharma and later became an arhat. The younger brother, however, had a very hard time. Cudapanthaka was so slow that he couldn't even remember the most basic teachings. His brother would try to teach him "All things are impermanent; therefore there is no-self." He remembers the first line, but forgets the second line. There are a couple of versions to this story. I relate the following:

At one time Mahāpanthaka was trying to teach Cudapanthaka outside of the *vihāra* because it was simply too embarrassing to teach him in front of others. They were out in the fields.

*Mahāpanthaka: "All things are impermanent; therefore there is no-self. Okay, now you say it."*

*Cudapanthaka: “All things are impermanent. Therefore... therefore....”*

*Mahāpanthaka: “Therefore no-self! No-self!”*

*Cudapanthaka: “Yes, no-self. No-self because... because...”*

*Mahāpanthaka: “Because of impermanence! Try again!”*

*Cudapanthaka: “All things are impermanent. Therefore... therefore....” Even the farmer tilting the field turned around and said, “Therefore there’s no-self.”*

Frustrated, Mahapanthaka gave up on Cudapanthaka, and left him. Cudapanthaka was so sad; all he could do was cry, and he wanted to leave Sangha. The Buddha, knowing what had happened, went to Cudapanthaka and said to him, “I will go teach you.” The Buddha didn’t bother teaching him concepts, but merely asked him to clean the *vihāra*.

*Cudapanthaka, sweep the ground. While you do it, say, “I sweep away impurity.”*

Now, mind you that it’s pointless to sweep the dust from the ground of a *vihāra*, a forest temple, since it is built right in the forest! It’s not like the *vihāra* had cement floors during the Buddha’s time that could be swept clean; it is dirt! So basically the Buddha asked him to sweep the dirt from one end of the *vihāra* to the other. So Cudapanthaka did that. He swept the dirt back and forth. He swept all day long, saying, “I sweep away impurity... I sweep.” In a way, practice is like moving furniture from one end of the room to another. No matter how we rearrange the pieces, there is absolutely no effect on the room! Yet, moving furniture, making it tidy and neat, does help in recognizing the spaciousness of the room.

One day, it dawned on Cudapanthaka that the ground is just dusty, impure—no matter how he swept. All he’s doing is sweeping dirt from one place to another. The Buddha knew this, and suddenly appeared to him and said, “It is not that the ground is impure, it just seems so because of the dust. It is the same with the impurity of craving, aversion, and delusion that stain your mind.” Suddenly Cudapanthaka had an insight. He realized that just like the ground in the *vihāra* and the dust that he swept from here to there, his mind is originally clean despite the afflictions. He persisted to meditate on this and very soon realized arhathood. This is an example of the fourth category of practitioners described in the *Yuganaddha Sutta*.

The Buddha often spoken about practitioners who reached liberation through wisdom. There are, of course, some people who are liberated through the sequential practice of calming and insight or *śamatha* and then *vipaśyanā*. But there are some people who are liberated by a single phrase, a single teaching. Consider the *Kitagiri Sutta* (*Majjhima Nikāya* 70. PTS: M i 473) in which the Buddha spoke about seven different types of practitioners: Those beings who are liberated by both ways (i.e., *śamatha* and then *vipaśyanā*); those beings liberated by wisdom (i.e., *vipaśyanā*); those beings who are liberated through bodily witness of the *samādhis* (i.e., *śamatha*); those beings who are liberated through attainment of view; those who are released through conviction, but they are not liberated yet; those who are dharma-followers who haven’t experienced insight;

and those who are conviction-followers. It is not the place to elaborate on all of these seven types but what is important here are those who are liberated through attainment of view and conviction.

This scripture states:

*What is the individual liberated through view? There is the case where a certain individual does not remain touching with his body those peaceful liberations that transcend form, that are formless, but—having seen with insight—some of his vexations are ended, and he has reviewed and examined with discernment the teachings proclaimed by the Tathāgata. This is called an individual who is liberated through view. Regarding this monk, I say that he has a task to do with heedfulness. Why is that? This venerable one, when making use of suitable resting places, associating with admirable friends, balancing his [mental] faculties, will reach and remain in the supreme goal of the holy life for which clansmen rightly go forth from home into homelessness, knowing and realizing it for himself in the here and now. Envisioning this fruit of heedfulness for this monk, I say that he has a task to do with heedfulness.*

*What is the individual released through conviction? There is the case where a certain individual does not remain touching with his body those peaceful liberations... but—having seen with insight—some of his vexations are ended, and his conviction in the Tathāgata is settled, rooted, and established. This is called an individual who is released through conviction... (Emphasis mine; Thanissaro Bhikkhu 2005)*

These two types of practitioners have not attained meditative absorptions but due to the power of their insight into no-self have ended some of their vexations. Even though they have insight into the holy path, they still need to practice. In the first case, those released through view, refer to the stage just short of arhathood. In the second case, released through conviction means the practitioner no longer waivers because they have personally seen their self-nature, or no-self. They are said to be “convinced” of buddhadharma. There may still be a long while to go before they reach liberation but they would have secured the correct view. If the power of their insight is strong enough, they would have eliminated the obscuration of views (Skt., *darśana-heya*). In the course of practice, they will experience their self-nature or awakening again and again, their insight becomes stronger and firmer, dissolving all remaining obscuration of vexations (Skt., *kleśas*). This is normal, because our vexations—patterns of our habitual tendencies—are so heavy. One insight will not dissolve them all. We need to experience the emptiness of self-grasping repeatedly.

According to the early teachings, if the initial insight is substantial enough, then one becomes a “stream-enterer” (Skt., *srotaāpanna*). Continuing on the path, the practitioner will dissolve eighty-eight types of vexations that are in accordance with the nine levels of the three realms until they pass through the stages of “once-returned” (Skt., *sakrdāgāmin*), “nonreturner” (Skt., *anāgāmin*) and lastly, “arhathood,” which is the stage of “no more tasks to do.” Why is that? The practitioner is now incapable of being “heedless,” incapable of transgression and generating the poisons of craving, aversion, delusion, arrogance, and doubt. In the *bodhisattva* vehicle of the Mahāyāna, instead of eighty-eight kinds of vexations, it is one hundred and twelve.

If a person's insight into liberation is genuine, and that person can still break precepts—do harm to other beings—then that insight is either very, very shallow, or that person has become complacent and stopped practicing. For this reason, the Buddha warns that such a person still “has a task to do with heedfulness.”

With regards to being released through conviction, does this mean we cannot be convinced of the usefulness of buddhadharma? At least not until we realize an initial awakening? No. We do not have to wait until we are enlightened to be convinced of the usefulness of practice. The point here is that when we practice, our minds are calmer, we gain clarity, and we see the benefits in our lives. We're less reactive to things around us; we're clearheaded. That is a “conviction” that no one can take away from you. It may be a different story if you just read a book about the benefits of practice, but haven't really experienced it personally. If that were the case, your conviction might waver in facing life's difficulties. As long as you've tasted the benefit and efficacy of buddhadharma, you will know it is good everywhere and at all times: before enlightenment, after enlightenment, and complete enlightenment. No one can take that away from you.

Chan does not generally talk about “stages of practice,” and it would be impossible to match which realization corresponds to which level of insight in the early and Mahāyāna teachings. I only mention these doctrinal points to clarify the nature of awakening and the need for continual practice.

The teaching of Silent Illumination can be found in early scriptures and in Mahāyāna scriptures as well. However, it is most prominently found in the Chinese Tiantai Buddhist doctrine, in the practice and realization of “Perfect and Sudden Calming and Insight” developed by the 6th century. Tiantai was one of the first Buddhist schools in China that systemized Buddhist teachings.

Tiantai master Zhiyi (538-597), especially in his *Great Calming and Contemplation*, talks about a particular practice that's called the “*Samādhi* of Wherever the Mind is Directed.” Sometimes it is also called the “*Samādhi* of Wakefulness of Mind” (Stevenson 1986, 75-82). In other words, this is the samādhi of wherever one is, whatever one is doing, at all times. This is the practice where the practitioner—whether standing, sitting, lying, or walking—contemplates the nature of mind and anchors that contemplation in whatever task is at hand. The contemplation is based on the four phases of mind. First: not yet thinking. Second: about to think. Third: engagement of thought. Fourth: after having thought.

These four phases lie at the heart of each instant of our own activities in daily life. Thought precedes all our actions. In this contemplation, the contemplation is so refined that one is clear of every possible state of mind. Before thoughts arise, the practitioner is already aware of the subtle intentionality of the mind. For example, “not having thought” refers to being clear of the state before intention formulates into a thought, a concept. Of course, this is a very advanced practice.

How does one contemplate? One contemplates that, at the very moment of each of these phases, the mind is identical to the nature of emptiness, intrinsically devoid of permanent entity, fixation. The practice is not trying to get rid of thoughts. There's mentation, but one recognizes that all

possible modes of mind—all modes of existence—are intrinsically existent and empty. This is the Mahāyāna approach. It neither suppresses thoughts, nor does it follow or become deluded by thoughts. At the same time of engaging with the world to benefit all beings, one appreciates that existence is like a flower in the sky or the horns on a rabbit. Do you understand?

In Tiantai Buddhism's great calming and contemplation, wherever you go, there is realization. The arising and cessation of thought simultaneously reveal the nature of emptiness. This practice is very technical and doctrinally informed. However, it is very difficult to practice. Chan formulated a much simpler approach to practice, and that is Silent Illumination: Just be here, sitting. In the very act of just sitting, you're originally unconstrained by wandering thoughts, patterns of mind, and with the natural awareness of this moment, grounded in the body sitting. This principle can be applied to walking, standing, and lying—all modes of activities. It is just that sitting is easier, so one begins there.



### **The Experience of Silent Illumination**

It is helpful to establish a good foundation of practice by meditating with the breath. Otherwise it'll be very hard to practice Silent Illumination. Not grasping is silence; being clear is illumination. These two are intertwined, inseparable, not sequentially but simultaneously cultivated. I have already stated that the pure practice of Silent Illumination has no stages. Why then do practitioners experience stages? They experience stages because of a kind of lopsidedness—*vipāśyanā* overpowering *śamatha*. When *vipāśyanā* is stronger, the mind becomes stirred and there's no stability. There should be a balance; the mind should not enter into absorption, nor should it give rise to scattered thought. Therefore, it's not *jhāna* or *dhyāna*, and of course it's not discursive thinking either. Is it somewhere in between? No. When you sit, if

thoughts arise, they liberate themselves in this moment. The furniture of our mind naturally does not obscure the spaciousness of the room. One simply rests in the presence of here.

Is there a need to somehow go through the stages of unifying the mind and bringing the mind to a kind of trance state—meditative absorption? No. Besides, it's very difficult for contemporary people to do that. As stated above, even during the Buddha's time, some people were liberated through wisdom, as opposed to meditation states or *jhāna* or *dhyāna*. The *Yugananda Sutta* mentions this. Sometimes people can suddenly enter the path, even when they have difficulties understanding the Dharma or have obstacles.

Is it necessary to practice? Oh yes! It's necessary to practice—to familiarize yourself with that most natural state of being, of awareness, of not getting caught up by the furniture—but recognize the veil of attachment and see that it's empty. This can only come from practice of meditation. But remember that even when we practice, we're not trying to gain something or get rid of something. We have to have the correct view that this coming and going of vexations is originally empty. This is not a mere concept, but the way things actually are. To practice this is to practice the sudden path.

People may misunderstand spaciousness of the mind—the natural, open, dynamic aspect of the mind is sometimes taken as a kind of “Big Self.” I've already said it clearly in the article, “You Are Already Enlightened,” that the Big Self is not the awakened mind or the experience of no-self. The experience of Big Self—the unified, *samādhi* state—is just another kind of furniture; it is a state of mind. These states of mind are like altered states of consciousness. They are not the space, the room. Is that clear? If something can be gained, it can be lost. All kinds of unified states—miraculous, infinite space, infinite light, a sense of oneness with self and others—they're all natural states in the course of practice but they are not enlightenment. In meditation we don't try to suppress them, just as we don't try to suppress wandering thoughts.

It is possible to practice Silent Illumination either tensely or in a relaxed manner. Practicing tensely you may gain concentration, stability and clarity relatively quickly, but you will not be able to sustain it for long. You can only hold it for a short period of maybe 30 minutes to an hour. If the relaxed approach works well, then there is no need to use the tense approach. Silent Illumination should be practiced according to the practitioner's condition and situation. If you're very drowsy, the teacher may encourage you to practice more diligently or tensely. This is only expedient means. The key in practice is the simultaneous balance of *śamatha* and *vipaśyanā*.

How does Silent Illumination compare to *vipaśyanā*? The very nature of *vipaśyanā* is closely linked with impermanence, which is how everything is. All things are in motion; when we observe this change with the changing mind, it is an excellent way to gain personal experience of no-self and emptiness. This method has great resonance with Silent Illumination. However, all things that come and go—that change—are only furniture. It is not Silent Illumination. For example, the key to engaging in *vipaśyanā* is to contemplate what are traditionally called the four foundations of mindfulness: body, sensation, mental factors, and dharma. One contemplates them through motion, change, and interactions. The contemplating awareness itself notices change; awareness then becomes characterized by change. Realizing impermanence, we

recognize the psycho-physiological flow of events and realize no-self (*Mahā-Satipatthāna Sutta*, *Digha Nikāya* 22. PTS: D ii 290).

In Silent Illumination, within stillness, there is function. One does not analyze or observe impermanence or change. Analysis here means watching things arise and fall and recognizing them as impermanent. In Silent Illumination, one does not engage in analysis. Instead, one is simply aware of the clarity of the totality of this moment here and now. Even though in this state, all things naturally—of their accord—come and go; there's no need to focus on them. To do so, is to fabricate, construct a thing, to focus on the “furniture.” Nor should one fixate on stillness, a state devoid of contents. In every moment, silence and illumination—freedom from scatteredness and natural clarity—is already present in a dynamic way. This means one should not be attached to the furniture, but be naturally aware of the spaciousness or emptiness of the room. The nature of emptiness, the nature of unconstructedness, is simply freedom from fabrications. One sits without taking anything as real, concrete, fixed—not even impermanence. Yet, one is clear what's going on. What is going on is sitting. Uncontrived and clear, the sitting then becomes seamless, and this naturalness of Silent Illumination extends to all activities of life.

Are *vipāśyanā* and Silent Illumination completely different? No. There is a natural resonance. The difference lies in their awareness: one centers on impermanence; the other on emptiness, or uncontrived clarity. In other words, the former is awareness of the furniture, while the latter is awareness of the room. The scenery that one experiences on these respective paths may be different, naturally, because the route is different. For example, some of you walked to the center tonight, while some of you drove a car. So far, I've seen no one coming by helicopter. But it is possible! Different paths naturally generate different scenery, but the environment—the center—is the same. Both arrive at the same place. The taste of liberation is the same.

There may be a slight difference in regard to the experience of no-self—the basic experience is the same—but the route or angle taken to get to the room affects how you see the room. In Chan the furniture does not obstruct the openness of the room, so the practitioner engages with the world actively, using all modes of action and challenges of life as opportunities for practice. While seated meditation and intense retreat practice play an important role in Chan, daily life as practice is more important. There is no need to avoid the commotion of daily life in order to practice in a solitary manner. In fact, such practice is perceived as selfish and obstructs the arising of compassion.

Compassion arises naturally as a result of insight in daily life. Buddhist insight is always in accordance with wisdom, the absence of the vexations. So compassion in the Chan tradition is not necessarily being sugary sweet with a big smile, letting people walk all over you. In Chan, compassion is the function of wisdom, the absence of the poisons of craving, aversion, delusion, arrogance, and doubt. True compassion is selflessness.

The Buddha, in describing what compassion is, often framed it as free from the poisons of the mind. In the often cited *Kālāma Sutta* (*Anguttara Nikāya* 3.65. PTS: A i 188), which teaches that one should not rely on hearsay or authority of others, but personally experience the truth, the Buddha also explains the nature of happiness and compassion in relation to the craving and other poisons of the mind:

*The uncovetous person, not overcome by craving, his mind not possessed by craving, does not kill living beings, take what is not given, go after another person's wife, tell lies, or induce others to do likewise. All of which is for his long-term welfare and happiness. The uncovetous person, not overcome by aversion, his mind not possessed by aversion, does not kill living beings, take what is not given, go after another person's wife, tell lies, or induce others to do likewise. All of which is for his long-term welfare and happiness. The practitioner, undeluded, not overcome by delusion, his mind not possessed by delusion, does not kill living beings, take what is not given, go after another person's wife, tell lies, or induce others to do likewise. All of which is for his long-term welfare and happiness. (Thanissaro Bhikkhu 1994)*

Elsewhere (*Sāleyyaka Sutta, Majjhima Nikāya 41*), the Buddha states that:

*One who abandons the destruction of life, abstains from the destruction of life, with rod and weapons laid aside, conscientious, merciful, he dwells compassionate to all living beings.*  
(*Bhikkhu Bodhi 2005, 158-159*)

From these passages, we see that to be free from the three poisons of craving, aversion, and delusion—the root causes of suffering—is to be compassionate, to bring long-term welfare and happiness to all beings. What do we call the state free from the three poisons? Wisdom! Thus, wisdom and compassion are the same. It's not even like the two wings of a bird, or two wheels of a bicycle. It's actually the same thing. The mirror which reflects the image; the spaciousness of the room naturally accommodates all things, all kinds of furniture—these are the workings of wisdom and compassion, the natural function of the awakened mind. So in wisdom, compassion arises naturally.

Now, can compassion be cultivated? Of course! We have to cultivate it. But we have to cultivate it on the basis of wisdom. How? Amidst daily life. This does not mean to try to get rid of aversion in order to be purposefully kind. But to be free of attachments to the furniture, and understand that all beings are intrinsically awakened—even those whom we dislike. There is no need to run from chaos or the adversity of life. With this reverence for all beings, we engage with others, with the world. In so doing, we don't take it that we're "helping" all beings but we see them as *bodhisattvas* helping us. The difficulties we face are embraced with humility, forgiveness, and gratitude.

I discuss how to practice in daily life in detail in my ebook, *Essence of Chan*, if you are interested. I will not elaborate on it here. Suffice it to say that the key is to be free from the vexations, the poisons of the mind, and actively cultivate virtues. For example, when a person holding a stick hits you, do you get angry at the stick or the person? No one gets angry at the stick because it is the person holding the stick. Similarly, if a person is in the grip of greed, aversion, and delusion, and has wronged you, do you get angry at the person or the three poisons? Since the one who has wronged you is under the sway of vexation, don't see them as perpetrators, but recognize the three poisons as the culprit. In this way we can actively forgive and help others.

Do we try to correct the person who has been driven to harmful actions by vexations? Do we help them to change? Yes. Things that need to get done must be done. In the process, we free ourselves from ideas that “we’re helping”—not inject our sense of self-reference in our actions—and yet everyone is helped. We don’t let people push us around because we have to act compassionately. We help people for the sake of their own wisdom and compassion in that we allow these qualities to manifest in their own accord, in their own lives, without any set agendas or fixed patterns. This is the way of understanding the natural function of Silent Illumination in life.

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**Excerpt from Hongzhi chanshi guanglu  
(Extensive Records of Chan Master Hongzhi)  
in volume 48 of the Taisho shinshu daizokyo**

**© Translation by Guo Gu**

*Wide and far-reaching without limit; pure and clean, it emits light. Its spiritual potency is unobscured. Although it is bright, there are no objects of illumination. It can be said to be empty, yet this emptiness is [full of] luminosity. It illumines in self-purity, beyond the working of causes and conditions, apart from subject and object. Its wondrousness and subtleties are ever present; its luminosity is also vast and open. Moreover, this is not something that can be conceived of as existence or nonexistence. Nor can it be deliberated about with words and analogies. Right here—at this pivotal axle, opening the swinging gate and clearing the way, it is able to respond effortlessly to circumstances—the great function is free from hindrances. At all places, turning and turning about, it does not follow conditions nor can it be trapped in models. In the midst of everything, it settles securely. With “that,” it is identical to what “that” is; with “this,” it is identical to what “this” is. “This and that” inter-fuse and merge without distinction. Therefore it is said, “Like the earth that holds up a mountain, unaware of its steepness and loftiness; like the stone that contains jade, unaware of the flawlessness of the jade. If one can be thus, this is truly leaving home. People who have left home must get hold of the essence in this way.*

Guo Gu will be leading a weekend retreat at the Barre Center of Buddhist Studies on March 14-16, 2014. For more information:

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