

Guo Gu

*Meditation Month 2021: Silent Illumination*

Week 4: "Let Go and Break Through"

March 22, 2021



Hello, my name is Guo Gu. Welcome back to week four, the last week of Tricycle's March Meditation Month. This week we will be learning silent illumination proper. What is silent illumination? How do we practice it? The term silent illumination was coined in the 12th or 13th century as a poetic expression of awakening, Buddha's awakening, and the nature of mind. So, it's just a metaphor.

"Silence" refers to the intrinsic freedom within us. Buddhism talks about this freedom as selflessness, being free from self-referentiality and self-attachments that mediate all of the experiences, contaminating them with "me, I, mine" and along with that, gaining, losing, having, lacking, good, bad, craving, rejecting. Silence refers to that intrinsic freedom free from this self-referentiality.

"Illumination" refers to the function of that selfless wisdom. What is that? Connections. So, sometimes people come across words like emptiness in Buddhism, which is another way of saying selfless wisdom, or they come across the term no-self, and they start to have a pessimistic, nihilistic understanding of it. Actually, emptiness and no-self just mean relationships. We exist because of everyone else. Everything about us, our thoughts, feelings, our knowledge, our intellect, our ability to think, comes together because of our connection with others. So, all of us are intimately, biologically, structurally, phenomenologically connected. So there is no Guo Gu-ness to Guo Gu. Guo Gu is made up of non-Guo Gu, all of you, all of my life experiences, everyone else. And that points to the connections. So, the wisdom that arises from this direct perception of that, direct experiencing that, is also called compassion. That's why in Buddhism, wisdom and compassion are not only like two wings of a bird; they are really the same thing. Wisdom points to the essence and compassion points to the function.

So, this metaphor or this poetic expression of silent illumination is pointing to the union of wisdom and compassion—selflessness—and the function of that selflessness, the interconnectedness. So actions that stem from silent illumination come from this connection as opposed to self-referentiality and a self-centered perspective. So, essence, function, wisdom, compassion, silent illumination. The last term, silent illumination, points to our intrinsic freedom.

What is the method? Traditionally, silent illumination is not really a method of practice. It's just another way of expressing awakening. This is what happens when a person is awakened, they function selflessly, connected with everyone and everything. But the principle of silent illumination—wisdom and compassion, essence and function—can be applied to methods of practice. As I said earlier, methods of practice must match with the state of our mind; from scattered to concentrated, concentrated to unified, unified to the awakened mind. So, silent

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illumination is actually the awakened mind. We can use this principle to guide us in to practice when we are scattered, when we are concentrated, and when we are unified. I hope that makes sense to you.

So, how to practice? This principle not only points to awakening, but also the nature of our being, the nature of mind, which is empty and at the same time, clear, clarity. So, empty just means decentered, right? Not self-referential. Clarity is the natural function of the mind, the natural ability of the mind, the rawest function of the mind, you could say, not contaminated with words and language, the contents of the mind.

Now, there's a lot of terms for that, some people call it valid perception, like I refer to it in the third series. So, some people refer to it as valid perception. Some people refer to it as naked awareness or bare attention. It doesn't really matter what term we use, the focus is actually experiencing, I don't typically like to use the word, awareness or clarity, because that makes it into a thing, one more thing among all the things that we tend to reify and solidify into a thing and chase after it. So, the most ordinary, down-to-earth way of expressing this is "just experiencing," moment to moment to moment. Our experiencing is the most natural function. Our mind needs not to have that which we experience. So experiencing without the experienced. The nature of mind.

Now most of us are tethered to what we experience. Our habit tendency is to make everything into a thing. We can even make ourselves into a thing that we experience, a footnote to that. Some people have mistaken mindfulness, awareness, clarity, with self-consciousness. So they take being aware of yourself doing this, doing that, mindfully doing that as the Buddhist practice of mindfulness. That's not mindfulness. That's self-consciousness. This is the function of the illusory mind, the mind that bifurcates and polarizes into subject and object, making everything into a thing, making yourself into a thing, and then you watch it. That is not mindfulness. Nor is that awareness. Buddhists talk about natural experiencing. In this natural experiencing, there is no other mind looking at this, there is just experiencing (clap) moment-to-moment freshness. There's no self-conscious little voice standing on our shoulder, "You should do that. You're doing a great job. You shouldn't do that, you shouldn't do this," all this chattering or objectifying our every movement and watching it. There's just in the flow of the experiencing. So, that is genuine awareness.

How do we relate this to silent illumination? Will we build on the foundation of what we have learned? We've learned progressive relaxation and grounding ourselves in tune with the body and in tune with the shifts in tones of undercurrent feeling, exposing them, embracing them, working with them. You may begin with the breath and segway into the third part of the series, direct

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contemplation, where a scattered mind moves to a unified mind, right, before we let go of the unified mind. So, scattered mind, grounding the body; working with the breath, different levels here [points to nose], here [points to abdomen], sitting, and then focused on direct contemplation. More and more focus on the experiencing of the freshness of this moment. Of breathing of course, but not so much with breathing as an object, but just experiencing the freshness of the breath.

In time we can let go of all the methods that we've been using, which are like crutches helping us. We will no longer need to use these crutches to walk anymore, to meditate anymore. Meditation methods are like props, gadgets, or crutches. So if the mind is scattered, you better have a very complicated crutch to busy yourself doing this, doing that. The more we're able to bring ourselves to the present the more this brings together the body, the experiencing, the method. These three come together in the present so that there's no separation.

So when you're at the stage in which you ground yourself, meditate on the breath, when the breath is becoming subtle, rooted, grounded to earth, and you are applying the principles of direct contemplation, directly experiencing moment-to-moment sensation, just the experiencing itself, at that moment with the least amount of props, the least amount of extra things, we become more and more aligned with the nature of mind. We're just experiencing the freshness of this moment.

Concretely speaking, when we sit in meditation, we're simply experiencing the reality of sitting. That's why sometimes this practice is called "just sitting." Just sitting. But when most people do just sitting, they are not just sitting. They are doing breath, they're doing all kinds of things, there are all kinds of wandering thoughts. The key to all of these methods is experiencing. And this experiencing, is not up here in the head. It's embodied. That's why the foundational practices are very important. They prevent us from resorting to our habit of thinking through everything, imagining on a discursive level. It's actually grounded, embodied. So, this embodied experiencing of the reality of this moment, which is sitting, and this experiencing has the qualities of freshness, wakefulness, direct experiencing, valid perception, not mediated by words and language, discrimination, comparison, labels, names.

To do this practice, we have to have a good foundation. We have to practice with the breath in a particular way, in an embodied way, priming the body and mind in tune with what's happening. Then we have to integrate that with direct valid perception, direct contemplation. Then we'll be able to do this advanced practice of silent illumination. The way the silent illumination or this principle is practiced is what we call the simultaneous practice of *shamatha* and *vipashyana*, stillness and awareness, wakefulness, or insight.

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Why is it called simultaneous? Because if you stay with the freshness of this moment instant by instant by instant, free from or diminishing self-referentiality, the mind returns to its original state, which is free from wandering. That is self. It is shamatha or stillness. It is not the one-pointed stillness practice, it's a kind of vast open type of stillness, regaining the mind's original state, which is free from all these contents, all these crutches and all these different things, words and language. Stillness in essence. And if you stay with this wakefulness, you will not enter into a stagnant and deadening kind of trance meditative state.

We call that kind of stillness calm abiding. Why? Because wakefulness is there, clarity is there. And that clarity is not clarity of a particular thing. If you're clear, free from wandering thoughts of a particular thing, like an object of meditation, you will enter into a meditative trance, or you will enter into deep absorption. There is no object. So it's a kind of objectless meditation. Just a moment-to-moment reality of freshness, right here, right now. So the mind is quite alive, vibrant, yet without content, not caught up or tethered to any particular thing. So it regains the natural awakening state, selfless yet this connectedness, vibrant. So that's quite advanced, as a practice, but if you do the foundations, and you have proper guidance and dedication in your practice you will gain more experience in this. Those of you who have practiced in other traditions, maybe some of you are seasoned practitioners, you will know what I'm talking about, this freshness.

This is in alignment with awakening. So this is the Chan position. This is why Chan or Zen is called a sudden path. Why is it called sudden? It's not sudden in the temporal meaning of the word, it's not about time; it means that the basis of your practice and the practice itself, the path and the result or fruition, are all one. So the basis of your practice is grounded in how the nature of your mind works, silent illumination, stillness, and awakening. The method itself is the least contrived method, the least amount of props and crutches. So, it aligns itself with the nature of the mind as the path, and the result is the actualization of awakening. The course of practice is basically like clearing away all the extra things. It's like polishing a window clean. Now, just because you polish your window clean so it's spick and span doesn't mean that the window is not there. Sometimes birds run into windows; why? Because the window is still there. Similarly, just because you have this clarity, stillness, and simultaneous practice in sitting and also in daily life, it doesn't mean that your subtle self-attachment is not there. Self is still there. So, awakening would be like no window at all, no window at all, the window is shattered. And this happens suddenly.

But you must plant the seeds at the causal level so the fruition level is the same. An apple seed grows apples; if you plant banana seeds, you get bananas. So, the cause, the path, and the result.

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That's the simultaneous practice of shamatha and vipashyana, stillness and insight, silent illumination.

In this course we've learned progressive relaxation, somatic integration through working with the breath, direct contemplation, and learning to bracket our words, language, and discrimination to just experience things as they are as much as possible. And then integrating all three into the final teaching on silent illumination, practicing in accordance with our true nature on the path leading to the fruition of awakening. The key to all that is experiencing. So I'd like to thank you for giving me this opportunity to share these teachings, which are my way to repay my gratitude to my teacher and to all of you. Thank you.