

# The Silent Illumination Method

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*Following is a transcript from a lecture given by Master Sheng-yen during a 1993 Ch'an retreat, edited by Linda Peer and Harry Miller*

## Shikantaza and Silent Illumination

The Japanese term “*shikantaza*” literally means “*just sitting*”. Its original Chinese name, mo-chao, means “*silent illumination*”. “Silent” refers to not using any specific method of meditation and having no thoughts in your mind. “Illumination” means clarity. You are very clear about the state of your body and mind.

When the method of silent illumination was taken to Japan it was changed somewhat. The name given to it, “*just sitting*”, means just paying attention to sitting or just keeping the physical posture of sitting, and this was the new emphasis. The word “*silent*” was removed from the name of the method and the understanding that the mind should be clear and have no thoughts was not emphasized. In silent illumination, “*just sitting*” is only the first step. While you maintain the sitting posture, you should also try to establish the “silent” state of the mind. Eventually you reach a point where the mind does not move and yet is very clear. That unmoving mind is “*silent*”, and that clarity of mind is “*illumination*”. This is the meaning of “*silent illumination*”.

Faith in Mind, a poem attributed to the Third Patriarch of Ch'an, Seng-Ts'an (d. 606), begins with something like this: “*The highest path is not difficult, so long as you are free of discriminations*”. “Discriminations” can also be translated as “choices”, “selections”, or “preferences”. The highest path is not difficult, if you are free from choosing, selecting or preferring. You must keep the mind free from discrimination and attachment. The method in which the mind is kept free from discrimination and attachment is what is called “*silence*” here. But “*silent*” does not mean the mind is blank and cannot function. The mind is free from attachment, clear, and yet it still functions.

We also read in Faith in Mind that, *“This principle is neither hurried nor slow. One thought for ten thousand years”*. *“This principle”* is the mind of wisdom, and from its perspective time does not pass quickly or slowly. When we meditate or work, we may fall into a worldly samadhi state and feel that time passes very quickly. In an ordinary state we may feel that time passes quickly or slowly. However, in the mind of wisdom there is no such thing as slow or hurried time. If we can say there is thought in the mind of wisdom, it is an endless thought which never changes. This unchanging thought is no longer thought as we usually understand it. It is the unmoving mind of wisdom.

In the Song of Samatha of Master Yung-chia Hsuan-chueh (665 – 713, also the author of the Song of Enlightenment), two Chinese terms are used which can be translated as *“quiescence”* and *“clarity”*. Master Yung-chia uses them in two phrases, *“quiescence and clarity”*, and *“clarity and quiescence”*. They describe a person whose mind is both clear and unmoving. When an ordinary person’s mind is clear and alert, it is usually also active and full of scattered thoughts. Quiescence of mind is difficult to maintain. When the mind is quiet, it usually is not clear, even in a samadhi state. But Yung-chia describes these two states, quiescence and clarity as well as clarity and quiescence, as goals.

Master Hung-chi Chen-chueh (1091-1157), who invented the term “silent illumination” in his poem the Song of Silent Illumination, said this:

*In silence, words are forgotten.*

*In utter clarity, things appear.*

*“Words are forgotten”* means you experience no words, no language, no ideas, and no thought. There is no discrimination. This in combination with the second phrase, *“In utter clarity everything appears”*, means that although words, language and discrimination do not function, everything is still seen, heard, tasted and so on.

Someone told me that when he uses the Silent Illumination method, he eventually gets to a point where there is nothing there and he rests. That is

not true Silent Illumination. In Silent Illumination everything is there, but the mind is not moving. A person may think he has no thoughts because the coarser wandering thoughts are absent, but there will be fine, subtle wandering thoughts of which he is unaware. He may think there is nothing there and so stop practicing. In Chinese this is called “*Being on the dark side of a mountain in a cave inhabited by ghosts*”. The mountain is dark, so there is nothing to see, and in the cave of ghosts, what can one accomplish?

Now I would like to explain how to use the method of shikantaza. First, your posture should be upright. Do not lean in any direction. Be clear about your posture, because if you practice shikantaza, just sitting, at the very least you should be conscientious about sitting. It is also important to remain relaxed.

Next, be aware of your body, but do not think of it as yourself. Regard your body as a car you drive. You have to handle the car well, but it is not you. If you think of your body as yourself, you will be bothered by pain, itchiness and other vexations. Just take care of the body and be aware of it. The Chinese name for this method can be translated as “just take care of sitting.” You have to be mindful of your body as the driver must be mindful of the car, but the car is not the driver.

After a period of time, the body will sit naturally and cause no problems. Now you can begin to pay attention to the mind. If you were eating, your mind should be the “mind of eating,” and you would pay attention to that mind. When you are sitting, your mind should be the “mind of sitting.” You watch this sitting mind. Two different thoughts alternate: the mind of sitting and the mind, or thought, that watches the mind of sitting. First you watch the body sitting with little attention to the mind. When the body drops away, watch the mind. What is the mind? It is the mind of sitting! When your attention dissipates, you will lose awareness of this sitting mind and the sensations of the body will return. Then you should again watch the body sitting. Another possibility is that while you watch the mind you fall into a dull state, like “*Being on the dark side of the mountain in a cave inhabited by ghosts*”. When you become aware of this situation, your bodily

sensations return, and you should go back to watching them. Thus these two objects of attention, the body and the mind, are also used alternately.

In the state where you watch the mind, are you aware of the external environment, sound for example? If you want to hear sound, you will, and if you do not want to hear sound, you won't. At this point, you primarily pay attention to your own mind. Although you may hear sounds, they do not create discriminations.

There are three stages in this practice. You should start at the beginning and progress to deeper levels. First be mindful of your body. Then be mindful of your mind, and of the two thoughts alternating in it. The third stage is enlightenment. The mind is clear and, as the poem quoted said, "*In silence, words are forgotten. In utter clarity, things appear*". When you first practice, you will probably be in the first or second level. If you use this method correctly you will not enter into samadhi.

This last point needs clarification. It depends on how we use the term "*samadhi*". In Buddhadharma, samadhi has many meanings. For instance, Sakyamuni Buddha was always in samadhi. His mind was not moving, yet he still continued to function. This is wisdom. Sakyamuni Buddha's samadhi is great samadhi and this is the same as wisdom. When I said that in the practice of Silent Illumination, you should not enter samadhi, I meant worldly samadhi where you forget about space and time and are oblivious to the environment. The deeper kind of samadhi, which is the same as wisdom, is in fact the goal of Silent Illumination.

What good is this explanation of Silent Illumination for people who are not using this method? If you are using another method of practice and you reach a point where it is impossible to continue, you can switch to Silent Illumination and watch your body and mind. For instance, if you use the method of reciting Buddha's name with counting and you can no longer count, switch to Silent Illumination. If you use the hua-t'ou method, but find that rather than generating great doubt, you are simply repeating your hua-tou, you may reach a point where you can no longer recite it. You can then switch to Silent Illumination and watch your body and mind. Eventually, you

will be able to use your own method again. Silent Illumination can provide a continuum for you in this in-between state so that you do not waste time.

I was just asked whether the enlightenment that comes from Silent Illumination is sudden or gradual. Enlightenment is always instantaneous. It is the practice that is gradual. As I mentioned earlier, the third level of Silent Illumination is enlightenment. But how does one get there? As you practice, your attachments, discriminations, and wandering thoughts gradually subside. Eventually, you simply have no discriminations, but this change is instantaneous. When the change happens, you are in the state Hung-chi Cheng-chueh described as, “In silence, words are forgotten. In utter clarity, everything appears”.

After you have some experience practicing, the sentiments and vexations you ordinarily experience may not arise during practice. It does not mean that they are gone. It just means that when you practice they do not arise. When you use Silent Illumination, this may happen, especially at the second level, but that is not enlightenment. Practice is not like trying to clear thoughts from your mind and vexations from your life as if they were dust on a mirror. You cannot wipe the dust away and make yourself enlightened. It is not like that. Whether you use the methods of the Lin-chi or Tsao-tung sects within the Ch’an tradition, once enlightened, you realize that enlightenment has nothing to do with the practice that brought you there.

So why bother to practice? Practice is like a bridge that can lead to enlightenment, even though enlightenment has nothing to do with practice.