

# Quiet Mind Open Heart

*A Practice Period  
in Meditation*

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If I am going to die, the best way to prepare  
is to quiet my mind, and open my heart.  
If I am going to live, the best way to prepare  
is to quiet my mind, and open my heart.

—Ram Dass

For Kobun Chino Otagawa Roshi (1938–2002)  
with deep gratitude.

Mind to Mind  
Heart to Heart.

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## Quieting the Mind *Is* Opening the Heart

Good evening, everyone.

It's great to see you all again. We're well into our Practice Period now, and, as you know, our topic is quieting the mind and opening the heart. You may have noticed that I've been leaning quite heavily on the first part, on quieting the mind. You might be wondering, well, what about the other half, what about opening the heart? So that's what I'd like to talk about tonight. Why am I putting so much emphasis on quieting the mind? What about opening the heart?

In the Theravadin tradition there are meditation practices that focus on what are called the *brahmaviharas*. *Brahmavihara* is usually translated as "Heavenly Abode," and these four Heavenly Abodes are Loving Kindness (*metta* in Pali), Compassion (*karuna*), Sympathetic Joy (*mudita*) and Equanimity (*upekkha*). They're all various practices to encourage us to open our hearts. We could certainly say that we've been addressing equanimity in these past weeks, in the sense that training ourselves to quiet our minds definitely leads in this direction. But what about compassion and sympathetic joy and loving kindness? Many of you particularly know and use the practice of wishing well or loving kindness in *Metta* meditation. In this form we work with phrases over and over in an attempt to remind our hearts to open toward life. We do this as a regular activity here at Everyday Dharma on the third Saturday of the month. It's an enormously important and helpful practice.

So why do I keep coming back to *Shikantaza*? Well, certainly, for me, I feel as if I'm coming home. It's the place I started, where my practice began. Robert Frost says, "Home is the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in."<sup>24</sup> It's a wonderful description of home, and, in a way, *Shikantaza*—quieting the mind—does take us in when we go there.

But there's more to it than that. I've found that this coming back again and again to quieting the mind also opens the heart. There are all sorts of ways to understand the relationship between a quiet mind and an open heart, and I could tell you what other teachers say about this. Instead, what I'd like to talk about tonight is my own experience in working with these practices.

I find that if my mind is quiet, if I'm able to begin from a place of stillness inside, I'm much more likely to have a wiser or more skillfully open heart for the world around me. I experience that quieting the mind creates the natural possibility of opening the heart. It's really quite simple: compassion depends upon, and must begin with, being able to hear the world and its suffering. We can't hear if we're

always talking. We can't hear if we're always making noise and filling up the space in our minds. We can't hear anything but ourselves, if we're not quiet. When we are still, it's much easier for us to pay attention to others. With ongoing inattention, or distraction, or busyness, or simply a churning, constantly active mind, we often miss connecting with the world.

I want to tell you a story about this. I was talking recently with a friend who's in a relatively new relationship. My friend is incredibly capable, amazingly intelligent, extraordinarily self-demanding—maybe a perfectionist we could say—and equally demanding of others. She has a voracious mind. She finally met a really good man, and they're now several months into the relationship. She's having difficulties, especially with fear around commitment. She's beginning to pull back, almost to flinch about being together, and she worries that he may not be the right one after all. She said to me recently, "Sometimes, I have to confess, I don't find his comments very interesting."

"Ah," I thought to myself. Now, I know them both. I've met this man, and he is a great guy and incredibly intelligent too. So I said, "Well, if what he says seems not interesting, maybe you might try listening more closely? What do you think?" And she took that in and thought about it. She really heard the suggestion, and shortly after that, we ended the conversation. A few days later, she wrote me an e-mail. She said, "Lo and behold, when I saw him last night, I was able to relax and stay open, not pulling away. And I was able to really listen to what he was saying, and it's very good. Hooray!"

It's a wonderful story. She just needed to slow down and to quiet her very active mind, and then she could listen more deeply. It's not that her heart isn't capable of loving a good man. It's that her mind wasn't quiet enough to notice that this really good man was right there in front of her, and that, in fact, he had very interesting things to say.

In quietness, we can actually hear more clearly. In stillness, we can see more clearly. It takes a lot of courage to be willing not to fill up the space, to refrain from keeping everything in a flurry in our lives. We have to be brave to be still. I remember a teacher saying that she thought the word *courage* means "the willingness to look again." This practice of *Shikantaza*, of abiding in and returning to stillness, is a very courageous act. Our minds are always talking, always churning, always active. It's difficult even to notice that an open heart might be called for in a particular situa-

tion. And it's really difficult to look again, to have the courage to listen again, and to look again.

What I'm saying is that a quiet mind cultivates an open heart. It seems to me that a quiet mind "naturally"—and I use this word advisedly—leads to compassion and to loving kindness and to sympathetic joy. However, I don't necessarily experience the reverse. This is important: I don't always experience that an open heart cultivates a quiet mind. In fact, often it's just the opposite. If I start from a place of feeling great empathy first, it's very easy to lose my balance. We can lose balance exactly out of our strong feelings. When we have a passionate feeling of empathy in the beginning and our hearts are deeply touched at the outset, it's so easy for anger to arise, for judgment to arise, for fear, longing or agitation to come up. If we feel compassion from a busy mind, we are more likely to grasp at the first solution, which is often not the most skillful solution.

Here's another story. I have a childhood friend who was the oldest in a family of four siblings. He really loved his two sisters and one brother. Perhaps because he was the oldest, or perhaps simply because of his temperament, he was always the glue that held the kids together. When there was fighting, my friend was the peacemaker. When one of the kids messed up, he was the one who stepped in and made it right. And when his mother, who was troubled and rageful as they were growing up, would strike out at someone, he absorbed the blows, both literally and figuratively. The father was almost completely absent as a member of the family. So that was his childhood situation.

All four of these siblings have stayed very close to home. In fact, they live within a few blocks of each other in our hometown in Nebraska. The father, who, as I said, lived in the shadows, died in the same way. He slipped away almost unnoticed by the family. Meanwhile, the mother has grown into a very cruel elderly person. Because she can't live independently anymore, she lives in rotation with the various children. They can't afford to put her into full-time nursing care. But, because she is so difficult, the other three siblings have gradually stopped taking her, and she now lives fulltime with my responsible friend.

Wherever this woman goes, she sows disharmony. She tells each of the siblings separately that the others are better. She complains constantly. She's uncannily good at knowing how to turn the siblings against each other. Her background is very, very painful. She came from a traditional patriarchy, a family from the old country, with its usual abuse. I think we can say that she's absolutely doing the best she can. At

this point in her life, she cannot do other than she does. Although she's frail, she's basically healthy physically, and she's enormously abusive emotionally.

My friend called a few days ago practically in tears, which is unusual with him, and he said, "I can't stand it anymore," and I thought to myself, "How have you stood it for so long?" He said, "I can't stand it!" and he went into a tirade about his two sisters and his brother, how they won't help with anything for the mother. He feels betrayed; he feels abandoned. Occasionally, he alludes to the fact that his mother's behavior is incredibly painful, but mostly he talks about how much he loves her and how guilty he feels about not taking care of her as well as he would like. This man who has done so much feels guilty. I said to him, "What do you really want in this situation?" and he said right away, "I just want Momma to have what she really wants." I said, "As far as I can see, she does have what she really wants." And he replied, "It's not what she says, though; that's not what she tells me." I said, "But it's definitely what she does." Then I asked again, "My friend, what do you really want?" This time he gave a whole list of possible fix-it solutions for helping Momma be happy. He said, "I want my siblings to love her and be good to her. I want them to help out. She's always loved them more than she loved me, and that's OK, but they don't deserve her love. They should love her more in return. They always got the best of her and they don't appreciate her." Once more, I asked, "My friend, what do you want and need?"

Finally, he stopped talking and began to cry, and we waited together on the phone a long time. Eventually, he was quiet. We waited some more. He was still quiet. He waited a long time, and then he said, "I just want to be good enough for her. I just want to be good enough." My really incredibly good-enough old friend, with all his solutions, all his doing, all the busy mind fixing everything, when he stopped, when he listened, when he was able to be still in the midst of all the caretaking, he could finally hear how much he just wants to be loved. And he will have to do that for himself. He will never get it from her or from anyone else. But he could only feel this, realize this, when he was still.

The thing is, we first have to open our hearts to ourselves. We need to forgive ourselves. Often, we need to forgive ourselves just for being who we are. Stillness allows us to hear the suffering of the world, and often we need to start with our own suffering. A quiet mind makes possible an open heart. A quiet mind, a non-agitated mind, a mind that rests in stillness, is much more likely to be spacious toward the world, including ourselves. A quiet mind can notice the suffering of the world and empathize more easily. A quiet mind is simply better able to pay attention.

As we practice turning our minds toward stillness, toward quietness, toward calmness, we have the opportunity to see how much we all just want to be loved, to be accepted, to be forgiven for being who we are. We would all just like to be good enough. When our minds are quiet, maybe then we can finally listen to someone else; maybe we can finally hear ourselves—maybe even forgive ourselves, which is often the beginning of forgiving others.

The word *compassion* means “to feel with.” A compassionate heart, an open heart, which can feel with others and with ourselves, depends on a quiet mind, a mind that’s able to go home to stillness.

One final observation: in my experience, a mind anchored in stillness feels stronger. The heart can tolerate more. In this place of stillness, compassion more easily arises, but, also, I think we more naturally feel strong enough to bear the pain, to feel compassion, to allow our hearts to open. A still mind, a quiet mind gives us enormous strength. A quiet mind really makes possible an open heart.

So I encourage you to commit yourselves to this powerful practice of stillness. It helps us all turn toward healing, both for ourselves and for others, and we need this so much, the world needs it so much. So, please, still your mind. Rest in the stillness of your mind. And, much more naturally, your heart will open. There is no need to force it. Our hearts will open.

Thank you for listening.

