

are usually attributable to scattered attitude or laxity. If you are idling and hence indulging in wandering thoughts, try to perk up your spirit and make a vow to be diligent. Continue to use the method, but exert some real effort. Reflect that this is a rare opportunity to practice Dharma. But if you are clear that your agitation or frustration is not due to laziness, just relax, allow your mind to calm down naturally, and resume the method later.

## ILLUSIONS

Bodily illusions sometimes occur when you meditate. For example, you feel like your hands, your head, or even your whole body disappears. These illusions occur because the normal sensations from these areas have receded from your consciousness. If you stir up such thoughts as "My hands have disappeared," you are then creating wandering thoughts and straying from the method. After a few moments, normal sensations will naturally return. Another kind of illusion is feeling your body shrinking, being compressed, or expanding. Also common are illusions of your body thrusting upward or sinking downward. You can dispel most of these illusions by keeping your eyes open. If you do not become alarmed, these experiences will pass by themselves.

Whether you keep your eyes open or closed when meditating, it is possible to have illusions—seeing or hearing things. For example, every time you reach a certain stage, you hear sounds that do not come from the environment. When you become aware of them, always return to your awareness of just sitting on the cushion. If you do that, eventually these phenomena will pass. If you have lost the method in a cloud of haziness and your body does not seem to be there, simply open your eyes, move, and adopt a correct posture. Resume sitting when your body-sense returns. Once you are aware of these problems, practicing relaxation cures most of them. When relaxed, return to just sitting.

When you reach a stage where you experience an openness of mind, clear and free from wandering thoughts and the burdens and sensations of your body, please do not stir up new thoughts. Do not ask where you are, what you are doing, or what you should do. Just continue to sit and you will be practicing Silent Illumination. Your mind is very clear, open, and free from thoughts of grasping. The stillness of the mind is the silence; its clarity and openness are the illumination.

*Afternoon Talk: Stages of Silent Illumination*

Although we talk about stages in Silent Illumination, please do not expect to experience distinct and separate stages. We use the term "stages" as points of reference for instructing you. Therefore, do not imagine having to work your way systematically up to the highest stage. You can realize Silent Illumination even with the foundation practice of sitting in awareness. Talking about stages also conveys the various depths of experience in the practice. By analogy, when we talk about five stages in the breath-counting method, all five variations constitute the whole of meditating on the breath. The difference lies in the depth of the experience. It is possible to enter the deep practice of Silent Illumination as soon as you sit down. There is no absolute need to go through stages to reach silence and illumination. With that in mind, let's discuss the first two stages of Silent Illumination.

The first stage of Silent Illumination is entered through just sitting. One simply maintains an awareness of the whole body sitting there. Eventually, body and mind become one—your awareness is of the total body rather than its separate parts. This is the first stage, the union of body and mind. The body is no longer a burden, and its sensation fades away, leaving a crisp, clear, and open mind.

When you get deeper into the practice, the body, mind, and environment become one—internal and external are united. This is

the second stage. The environment refers to your immediate surroundings, which you now perceive as your great body, which is also just sitting; it no longer disturbs you or stirs up wandering thoughts. There is only the presence of the whole environment as you are sitting there. In this second stage of Silent Illumination the mind is very clear and open. You can practice this in sitting meditation and in daily life.

If you are still experiencing bodily sensations, you are not yet at the second stage. Continue to maintain your awareness of the whole-body sensation. Once the whole-body sensation recedes and your body is no longer any burden, you will experience lightness and openness, and clarity free from wandering thoughts and attachments. At this time, you perceive the environment as your great body sitting there. Treat it the same way as your ordinary body. You are aware of the totality of the environment—this retreat center, the birds, the wind, the airplane, the cars passing by, the great outdoors, other people. The particulars that you would normally sense now exist as the total environment: everything is you and you are everything. There are no longer any particulars; the whole environment is your body sitting there.

At this second stage, the internal and external have become one. While experiencing the immediacy of the environment, you are not influenced by it—it is all there but absorbed in stillness. There are no inner thoughts, no conditioning by external things. You perceive everything in the immediacy of the present. This is the silent aspect. The illumination aspect is the clear awareness of things as they are. You are undisturbed, motionless, and very clear as to the multitude of things surrounding you. This is the third stage. This Silent Illumination is likened to a mirror that is utterly still while images and shadows appear freely before it. Your external environment is like these passing images and shadows; your mind is this mirror, as silent as it is motionless, revealing all forms before it. This is the illumination aspect.

In some forms of *samadhi*, even though the mind is in utter stillness, it is oblivious to the environment—it is a stagnant stillness, not bright and open. By contrast, in the third stage of Silent Illumination the mind is still yet open, clearly reflecting multitudes of forms. Within this clarity the mind is still.

## PRACTICING IN DAILY LIFE

We practice Silent Illumination in our daily activities, whether it's raking leaves, preparing food, cleaning the bathrooms, eating, or resting. First, perform the activity in a routine but selfless manner. Every moment, see your task as your livelihood without seeing the environment as separate from yourself. It is all you. Keep working this way, silently, yet being very clear as to your activity and that around you. As you move, shift, and change while engaging in such tasks, the environment moves too. Do not move your mirror-mind; just let it reflect all of these different motions. Working in this fashion, your mind will become very stable and very clear, without relating things to yourself. You are just all things there as they are—in motion, with no reference point other than the task itself. If you do this, there can be no giving rise to moods, afflictions, likes, or dislikes.

The mind in this situation is at once clear and detached. Even if you are not sure how to perform a task, you can still be very clear about that. The mind is somewhat removed from this situation, but is willing to be taught. Similarly with fatigue, the body may tire after hard work, but the mind remains clear and detached. It recognizes that the body is tired, but there is no \*vexation. So what should you do? Take a rest, naturally.

Once on a retreat, I had given very precise instructions to a group of students to clear all the twigs and branches from a field and to pile them separately. Small ones stayed with small ones, large ones stayed with large ones. Once they began, I could see very clearly how they worked. Most of them set out in a random manner looking

around trying to find twigs. They found some in the east, then some in the west, some here and some there. Having dropped some on the ground, they picked them up and held some in their hands, not knowing what to do with them. So, they proceeded in a chaotic way, after a while looking fatigued and sluggish.

However, there was one student who was quite settled and clear. His pace was unhurried yet extremely efficient, without doubt or hesitation. Small ones stayed with small ones, large ones stayed with large ones, all laid out in a very orderly fashion. He was the most efficient, with a graceful fluidity to his work. Still, he did not seem fatigued at all. There was a drastic difference between him and everyone else. I relate this story because our work reflects our state of mind. If we can incorporate Silent Illumination into our daily tasks, we will be very efficient and orderly. There will be fluidity in our work and we will not easily tire. So Silent Illumination is very useful. Please remember that when we engage in activities, we should maintain a still mind while seeing everything clearly, without personal preferences. Just become one with the task and the environment. So when mind, body, and environment are one, with a reposed attitude and a clear mind, you will carry out your task with ease.

So keep in mind that you can practice the second stage in the Chan Hall as well as in daily activities. In silence, the illumination is ever present, and in illumination the silence is ever present; they are inseparable. Silent Illumination is both stillness and clarity. This is how you should carry yourself in meditation and also in postmeditation time.

The foundation—relaxation—should be established firmly. Next, be aware of the totality of your body and maintain the simplicity of that awareness. As the bodily burdens and sensations fall away, your sensory field expands so that you can incorporate the environment into your whole being. Do not imagine yourself in the

second stage merely because it is a progression from the first stage of just sitting. It must be experienced. You are taking the whole environment as your body sitting, without being distracted by particulars of sight or sound that are absorbed into the whole. Whatever stage you are in, maintain the principle that silence is not separate from illumination. This will become clearer later when we discuss the third stage of Silent Illumination.

*Also by Chan Master Sheng Yen*

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# THE METHOD OF NO-METHOD

*The Chan Practice of  
Silent Illumination*

CHAN MASTER  
Sheng Yen



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