

Field Eight - Realization: Direct Experience of Reality-with-a-Capital-R

The seventh Field of Zen Practice is Realization, gaining a direct, personal experience of the truth. There are different levels of truth, and the Dharma – Reality-with-a-Capital-R – is the biggest truth of all. Fortunately, it is a wonderful and liberating truth to wake up to. Realization gives you a larger perspective that can result in equanimity, even joy, and helps you live by choice instead of by Karma. However, it's important to understand that there is no “Realization” you can attain that means you know everything. The truth is infinite and there is always more to awaken to and embody.

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What Is Realization, and Why Does It Matter?

From the very beginning, Buddhism has focused on the power of Realization – the liberating, transformative power of perceiving the truth. Shakyamuni Buddha wanted to know how to achieve true peace of mind given the inevitability of illness, loss, old age, and death. He studied with the spiritual teachers of his time and spent six years diligently exploring different kinds of practice, including extreme asceticism. Finally, he settled upon a method of meditation that allowed him to see what truly caused human suffering, and how to alleviate that suffering despite the inevitability of illness, loss, old age, and death. The description of the Buddha's awakening relates a series of realizations he had about Karma, the Three Marks (impermanence, non-substantiality, and Dukkha), the Four Noble Truths, and the Eightfold Path.¹

Central to the Buddhist emphasis on Realization is the fact that Reality-with-a-Capital-R is a wonderful and liberating thing to wake up to. If, in contrast, the Buddha and our past Dharma ancestors had awakened to reality and found it was a nihilistic void, or that no lasting peace of mind was to be found except in the next life, or that spiritual practice could have little effect on your experience, what would be the point in waking up? You might as well make your best effort

¹ See the Field of Dharma Study for more on each of these insights, which became the core of the Buddha's teachings.

to ignore reality and take advantage of whatever pleasures you can before illness, old age, and death catch up with you.

Buddhism does not deny in any way that life can be terrible at times – painful, troubling, unjust, stressful, even agonizing. Nevertheless, regardless of your circumstances, it always helps to perceive your situation as clearly as you possibly can. Realization helps you respond appropriately, allowing you to live by choice instead of by Karma.

Even more importantly, Realization gives you a larger perspective that can result in equanimity, even joy. This is because there are different levels of truth, and the Dharma is the biggest truth of all. It doesn't exclude, deny, or contradict any of the smaller truths you experience, such as your reaction to injustice, the pain of an illness, or the grief of loss. But around, beneath, and permeating all of your experiences, embracing all of Life, are the truths of Emptiness, Suchness, and Buddha-Nature (among others).

In a sense, Reality-with-a-Capital-R is *more true* than almost everything you habitually perceive and think you are dealing with. This is not to disparage ordinary daily life or imply that it's just an illusion, but Reality contains ordinary daily life while – usually – daily life does not contain Reality. It is like fingers on a hand. If something obscured the hand and all you saw were fingers – physically separate and uniquely formed, moving independently – you might think only of the individual fingers. When you see the hand to which the fingers are attached, you see the digits are not ultimately separate and each serves a function only in relationship to the whole hand. The truth of the hand, in a sense, is *more true* than the impression of individual fingers. The larger truth includes – even relies on – the smaller truth of fingers which are, at least to some extent, physically and functionally independent.

There are many Zen and Buddhist words for Realization, including enlightenment, awakening, liberation, kensho, and satori. Sometimes these terms refer to very specific insights and others to comprehensive, stable, direct experience of Reality-with-a-Capital-R. I like the term “Realization” because it has a dual meaning, pointing both to conscious insight and the act of making something real. As I discuss later, in Zen both meanings of Realization are equally important, and, in fact, are approached as one and the same thing.

In practice, it's counter-productive to worry about categories or levels of insight, or fret about attaining some exotic awakening experience. It is enough to explore the transformative power of Realization in your own, direct experience. The truth is of one flavor, from a small insight into your own behavior that helps you change a habit to a profound insight into Emptiness that changes your whole perspective on Life.

Rather than striving for an elusive Enlightenment-with-a-Capital-E that will solve all your problems and make you into a respected and beloved saint, appreciate the many “enlightenments” you experience over the course of many years of practice. There is no “Realization” you can attain that means you know everything. The truth is infinite and there is always more to awaken to and embody.

Different Kinds of Knowing

As soon as we start talking about experiences like “perceiving the truth” or “waking up to Reality,” it becomes necessary to clarify what Buddhism means by “knowing” or “realizing.” Ultimately, transformative insight comes from direct, personal experiences of Reality-with-a-Capital-R. However, there are many different kinds of knowing, and they are all important to our practice.

To understand and appreciate different kinds of knowing, an analogy is helpful. Let’s say you are fascinated by New York City but have never been there. You begin reading everything you can about it and watch movies that take place there. At the beginning of your investigation, you know a little something about the city, and after a year or two you know a lot more. While your “knowing” at this point is intellectual and not based on direct experience, it can be useful, inspiring, and prepare you to visit.

Then you get to visit New York City for a week and you’re able to immerse yourself in the sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and physical experience of it. Some of your intellectual knowledge will be relevant during your visit, but you’ll also encounter things nothing in your previous study could have communicated to you. After a week, you will have a much richer knowledge of New York, based in part on direct, personal experience – but you also will have realized you only got to see a small fraction of the city. You visit again and again over the years, each visit deepening and broadening your knowledge and making it part of who you are.

Finally, you decide to move to New York. You will have experiences as a resident you never would have had as a visitor. Over the decades, you become a New Yorker and, while your knowledge of the city obviously grows continuously, you cease to consciously seek such knowledge. Because you are surrounded by the city, you only need to live your life in order to deepen your relationship with it.

No matter how many years you live in New York City after having moved there, however, your knowledge of it will never be quite as deep and pervasive as that of someone who was born and grew up there. Amazingly, in deepening your relationship with the Dharma, you can reach the experience of a native – after all, you *are* a native to Reality-with-a-Capital-R.

All levels of knowing are legitimate and valuable if you appreciate their limitations. Intellectual knowledge is important as long as you don’t conclude it’s a substitute for direct experience; this would be like having a lifelong obsession with New York City but never visiting. Encounters with Reality during Zazen or a meditation retreat deepen your knowledge of the truth, but those experiences can’t be fully captured and saved for later; to try doing so would be like habitually poring over snapshots and souvenirs from a visit to New York, seeking to re-live experiences that recede further and further into the past.

Even after you feel quite familiar with Reality and realize It is never apart from right here and now, it would be a mistake to believe your experiences add up to anything more than one being’s encounters with something boundless. This would be like living in New York City for decades

and boasting that there is nothing more you could learn about it. The whole point is to continually deepen your understanding of the Dharma.

The Importance of Quiet Mind, Silent Mind, and Samadhi

How do you work on Realization? Practice in all Fields of Zen prepares the ground for and facilitates awakening, but three are particularly relevant for cultivating the kind of insight necessary for Realization: Zazen, Mindfulness, and Dharma Study. Dharma Study challenges your existing ideas and assumptions, pointing you toward the answers to questions you may have never thought to ask. Zazen and Mindfulness allow you to become familiar with the experience of a Quiet Mind.

Quiet Mind is a mind without extraneous thinking, or at least mostly spacious with occasional thoughts passing through like background static, with very little emotional charge to them. This is the state of your mind when you have fully surrendered to the practice of Zazen, or when you are truly being Mindful. When you have let go of your mental map of reality, your mind is quiet and open to possibilities. When you are intimate with Life, your mind is quiet and receptive. When you are paying attention to whatever is happening, regardless of whether the situation seems relevant to your self-interest, your mind is quiet.

Quiet Mind is a prerequisite for Silent Mind, and Silent Mind is a prerequisite for Samadhi – the state of mind that allows you to Realize what is most true. Silent Mind is a mind truly without thought – spacious, clear, stable, alert, and aware. Samadhi is a state of nondual awareness, where your mental map falls away so completely there is no longer any sense of “you.” Your sense of self, at its most fundamental, is simply a sense of separateness – the cornerstone of your mental map. You might imagine that if your sense of separateness - your “self” - isn’t present, there will be no awareness at all, but of course this is not the case. The entire universe is present in Samadhi; the only thing missing is your mental presumption of separateness.

Samadhi is not a state that can be forced through effort, because such effort involves a sense of separation from a state or from something you want to realize. All you can do is sit with Silent Mind, creating the conditions for Samadhi. When you least expect it, Samadhi may come to you like a cat curling up in your lap. Just as you are likely to chase a cat away by grabbing it, you will chase away Samadhi unless you stay perfectly still, accepting it as a gift with no effort to make it last. Fortunately, even a moment of true Samadhi allows you to perceive the deeper aspects of the Dharma directly.

Sesshin: Ideal Conditions for a Quiet Mind

The importance of Samadhi is why we have the practice of Sesshin. Sesshin is a silent, residential meditation retreat lasting five or more days. You follow a communal schedule the entirety of the time: Waking before dawn for Zazen, sitting for around eight hours a day, and

breaking up the time spent in meditation with chanting, silent work and meals, and rest. For the duration of Sesshin you forgo all your usual comforts and coping mechanisms, including entertainment, socializing, alcohol, access to the internet, and communication with friends and family. The sheer quantity of Zazen, the silence, and the simplicity of Sesshin create the ideal conditions for Quiet Mind.

Of course, finding yourself in the middle of Sesshin doesn't mean you'll automatically have a Quiet Mind, or that you're guaranteed to experience a lot of it during the retreat. You'll probably be shocked to find out how active your mind will be despite the fact that you've essentially put it on a starvation diet in terms of distractions and new content. Still, almost all people who stick it out through an entire Sesshin (they can be very challenging physically, if not emotionally) find that their mind settles at least somewhat over the course of a few days. After rehashing its favorite themes over and over, the mind gets kind of sick of itself. Exhausted, it considers the possibility of cooperating a little more with Zazen and Mindfulness.

Sesshin is a practice that's meant to be done over and over; you are unlikely to taste prolonged Quiet Mind, or Silent Mind, or Samadhi, during your first Sesshin. However, you *are* likely to taste a *quieter* mind than you have ever experienced before, and this can be enough to inspire your practice for a long time. Sesshin shows you what is possible in your Zazen and in the Mindfulness you seek to carry into all aspects of your life. It can take many Sesshin over the course of many years before what you experience in the middle of retreat becomes similar to what you experience in the midst of your ordinary daily life, but with time, the difference between Sesshin and the rest of your life becomes less and less.

You may face practical obstacles when it comes to attending Sesshin. Health issues, family and work responsibilities, limited finances, or distance from Sesshin may mean a five-to-seven-day residential retreat is not an option for you at this time. Fortunately, post-Covid there are many opportunities for participating in a Sesshin from home, via the internet. This is definitely not the same as being in retreat in three dimensions, but it can still be a very valuable experience. If you want to deepen your Zen practice, it's important to carve out space for Sesshin, or shorter retreats, from your busy life at least once or twice a year.

Quiet Mind and the Radically Nondual Path of Soto Zen

In discussing "Realization," "Quiet Mind," and "Samadhi," it may appear that I have just created a contradiction with the essence of Soto Zen, which is a practice of radical nondualism. In Soto Zen, we practice Shikantaza, or Just Sitting, in which you do not aim at any goal or mind state. Practicing Mindfulness in Soto Zen is about wholehearted attention and care, not about disciplining an unruly mind. The chapters on the Fields of Zazen and Mindfulness say nothing about Quiet Mind, lest you set it up as a goal.

If you fully embrace the Soto Zen path, concepts like Realization, Quiet Mind, and Samadhi are not employed as goals but are descriptions of what happens as you *let go*. If you diligently practice Shikantaza in Sesshin, hour after hour, day after day, Just Sitting with no agenda at all,

your mind will gradually become quiet all on its own. Your awareness will become concentrated and alert (at least at times) – not because you forced it to become that way, but because everything extra has fallen away. It is an extremely elegant process without struggle, making it clear that you are coming home to your true nature, not achieving something special through the exercise of will. Similarly, Soto Zen Mindfulness is just showing up for your life: Just eating, just sleeping, just driving.

However, if you don't have much familiarity with Quiet Mind or feel generally unable to access it – in the meditation seat or off – the Soto Zen way may feel very hard or unrewarding. Your mind may be addicted to thinking for many reasons. You may be a “pleasure” type, full of anticipation for all the pleasures of this world, including sense pleasures but also the love of family, the joy of learning, and the satisfaction of achievement. You may be an “aversion” type, preoccupied with anger, worry, anxiety, fear, or regret. Or you may be a “discursive” type, with a mind that wanders endlessly from subject to subject with such a momentum it is very difficult to stop.

It's important to learn how to access Quiet Mind outside of Sesshin, which is where you spend 99% of your time. Why? It's not that there's anything wrong with thinking, it's that when your mind is quiet, you are better able to perceive what is most true. Maintaining a relationship with Quiet Mind also helps you experience Silent Mind – or maybe even Samadhi – when you are sitting (in Sesshin or outside of it).

From the point of view of Soto Zen, when Shikantaza or Mindfulness practice do not give you a satisfying taste of Quiet Mind, it means you are not fully surrendering to the practice. The way to address this is *not* by becoming critical of yourself and striving (thus creating dualism) but by strengthening your Bodhicitta – your sincere desire to practice, your willingness to give yourself over to the process. You might do this by reminding yourself, “Only Quiet Mind allows me to perceive what is most true.” The way of radical nondualism takes a great deal of effort, it's just not the usual kind of effort. It requires deep faith, and a certain recklessness when it comes to our self-centered agenda.

It may help to remind yourself that “quiet” is a relative term. There's a big difference between a “noisy” mind – roiling with emotionally charged or random thinking – and Silent Mind, but all aspects of your practice can lead, gradually, to a *quieter* mind. In particular, Studying the Self, living according to the Precepts, and Opening the Heart can decrease the prevalence of disturbing, compulsive thinking. It's a cause for celebration when you find yourself able to let go of your thinking fairly easily, returning – if just for a moment – to Quiet Mind.

Directed Effort Practices as Compassion for Yourself

As beautiful as a radically nondual path can be, there's no need to get puritanical about following one. It can be an act of compassion toward yourself to engage in *Directed Effort* practices in order to give yourself a taste of Quiet Mind. Most meditative techniques in the world, including most of those in Buddhism, are Directed Effort practices, where you set up a goal and employ

some kind of method meant to get you closer to that goal. They can be wonderfully effective. Sometimes you just need a break from your own thoughts, and spending some time with a Quiet Mind (or a quieter mind) can be very restorative.

Directed Effort practices for quieting the mind during meditation include concentrating on your breathing, perhaps counting exhalations from one to ten and then starting back at one. You might imagine your exhalation is a brush, wiping the mind free of thoughts. You can concentrate on sound or do a body scan (moving your awareness methodically throughout your body). A koan or obscure verse of teaching might serve as your object of focus as you lean into it with a questioning spirit. You can choose a short verse that inspires you to let go of thinking and repeat it silently to yourself. Some people find Metta practice calms the mind (see the chapter on Opening Your Heart). For all Directed Effort practices, when you notice your mind has wandered away from its meditative object, or when you have forgotten your method, you simply direct the mind back to its task – in the process, letting go of any extraneous thinking.

There are many Directed Effort Mindfulness practices you can do to access Quiet Mind as you go about your everyday life. You can cultivate awareness of the body, noticing when you are sitting, standing, walking, or lying down. Breath awareness is something that can be applied no matter what you're doing. You can recite gathas, or short verses meant to remind you to pay attention throughout the day, tying them to regular activities like getting up in the morning, brushing your teeth, or eating. The Buddha's teaching on the Four Foundations of Mindfulness offers more practices,² and there are contemporary books that suggest simple practices adapted for modern life.³

If you find it difficult to touch Quiet Mind even with Directed Effort practices, you might try one of two very simple approaches.⁴ First, set your intention to cultivate Quiet Mind for three breaths. Inhale slowly and consciously, then exhale slowly – perhaps even pursing your lips and making a soft sound. When you reach the natural end of your breath, hold your breath for a second or two. In those couple seconds, your mind is probably empty. Then release and inhale, then repeat for two more breaths, concentrating on the still place at the end of the exhalation. Second, set your intention to choose Quiet Mind for a very limited time, tied to some activity, such as while you wash *this* dish, or for the next *three* steps, or while folding the next *three* shirts. After the activity, set your mind free again. You can repeat these simple approaches frequently without setting up too much of a dualistic struggle within your own mind.

If Directed Effort practices don't work well for you, then a nondual approach like Soto Zen is for you! If you *do* find Directed Effort practices effective at quieting your mind, that's great. You should employ them in your practice as much as you like. Just try to be clear about what practice you are doing when, and why. If you want to fully explore Shikantaza and the Soto Zen way, turning to Directed Effort practices when you're dissatisfied with what's happening in your mind

² See "Satipatthana Sutta: The Foundations of Mindfulness" (MN 10), translated from the Pali by Nyanasatta Thera. Access to Insight (BCBS Edition), 1 December 2013, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.010.nysa.html>.

³ See Jan Chozen Bays' *How to Train a Wild Elephant: And Other Adventures in Mindfulness*. Boston, MA: Shambala Press, 2011.

⁴ Both of these approaches are based on suggestions from Jan Chozen Bays (in person teaching).

can be like entering into a marriage with a pre-nuptial agreement – preserving a “way out” that prevents you from committing completely, thereby affecting your Zazen and creating a self-fulfilling prophecy that Shikantaza won’t work for you. That said, there are plenty of Soto Zen practitioners who employ Directed Effort methods from time to time, so trust your own judgment about what works best for you.

The Oneness of Practice and Realization

“Realization” includes both conscious insight and the act of making something real. Many aspects of Zen practice are about learning to live in accord with and embody the deeper truths even before you have some kind of conscious experience of them. It is a central teaching in Soto Zen that “practice” – how you live, what you *do* – is not separate from Realization.

It can be tempting to imagine that you can attain some kind of Realization that will shortcut the work required to change your behavior, end your Dukkha, and Open Your Heart, but this is not how things work. Insight can be transformative, but it isn’t magic. You still need to embody whatever it is you have Realized, and that usually isn’t a straightforward process. It takes time, patience, and work (see chapter on Studying the Self).

Even more importantly, the work you do on yourself *is* Realization in action. Your Bodhicitta, after all, isn’t just what drives you to practice, it is your own awakened nature stirring within you, beckoning you to know It and manifest It. A moment of choosing to rest in Quiet Mind is It. An act of compassion is It. Accepting something difficult in order to relieve Dukkha is It.

Neither Too Close nor Too Far Away

One drawback to a radically nondual path is the temptation to become complacent. Because we refrain from setting up a goal, it is easy to assume there is nothing to Realize. This is very unfortunate.

One of our Soto Zen ancestors, Hongzhi, warned that “if illumination neglects serenity then aggressiveness appears,” but “if serenity neglects illumination, murkiness leads to wasted Dharma.”⁵ A radically nondual practice of letting go is serenity, while illumination is a conscious orientation toward the truth. If you get too caught up in trying to achieve understanding, it can lead to dualistic practice, striving, competitiveness, and frustration. If you settle into Just Sitting while forgetting the vast and subtle Dharma to which you have not yet awakened, you can become complacent and dull, missing the opportunity to Realize the truth for yourself. In Soto Zen, we say we have the “goal of goallessness;” it’s a goal unlike any other in your life, but it *is* a goal.

⁵ Guidepost for Silent Illumination, in Leighton, Taigen Dan (translator). *Cultivating the Empty Field: The Silent Illumination of Zen Master Hongzhi*. Boston, MA: Tuttle Publishing, 2000

In the classic Chan text “The Precious Mirror Samadhi,” it says, “Turning away and touching are both wrong, for it is like massive fire.”⁶ The Dharma is the greater truth underlying all of existence. If you want to know it, you have to engage attentively with your whole heart at the same time you are cultivating serenity, acceptance, humility, open-mindedness, and patience.

⁶ Translation by the Soto Shu: <https://www.sotozen.com/eng/practice/sutra/scriptures.html>