

The Place Where Nothing and Everything Meet

If you walk into a forest and put your ear against a tree, you will hear a silence in there that is like your own. It is a silence that has no end. Empty silence is the background to everything we perceive, in the same way that space is the background to everything we perceive. Most people don't like listening to that silence because it makes them feel alone, and they equate aloneness with loneliness. But the silent aloneness inside us — and inside all being — is not lonely.

The Zen master, Katagiri Roshi, once said, “When you see the bottom of your life, you see emptiness right there. You are standing by yourself, completely left alone in emptiness. That is a very deep sense of aloneness.”

Accepting emptiness like this, accepting our perfect aloneness, is not isolating; it is an essential part of our awakening. As Katagiri puts it, accepting emptiness allows us “to stand up in a new way.” When we stand up like that, with recognition of the ground of emptiness everywhere, we enter the reality of what he calls *togetherness and creativity*.

By accepting our perfect aloneness we embrace our perfect togetherness. Our aloneness extends to others because we see that everyone shares this same empty nature. “A bodhisattva,” Katagiri concludes, “constantly becomes alive from emptiness, and that life helps others.”

Sufis have a different way to describe all this, but it amounts to the same thing. “Essence is emptiness,” Rumi tells us. “Emptiness brings peace to your loving.” And this:

*Dear soul, if you were not friends
with the vast nothing inside,
why would you always be casting your net
into it, and waiting so patiently?
This invisible ocean has given you such abundance...*

And this:

*...lying in a zero circle, mute...
when we have totally surrendered to that beauty,
we will have become a mighty kindness.*

The sufic equation of dissolving into emptiness and emerging as love is identical with the image of the bodhisattva constantly becoming alive from emptiness. It is the movement of awakening described in Sufi teachings as *fana* and *baqa*. *Fana* is deconstruction of the self-illusion, most often translated as annihilation of the self. “I honor those,” Rumi says, “who empty the self and have only clear being there.”

Baqa is what comes after. As Coleman Barks describes it: “*Baqa* is the coming back from annihilation with cleansed enthusiasm for particulars. In the state of *baqa* one reenters the moment fully, doing small quiet work, sewing the robe of absence.” This is Katagiri’s “standing up” in a new way, the way of togetherness and creativity. Or, as Sufis might say, it is the expression of *love* and of *doing the beautiful* that naturally flows from emptying oneself into clear being.

In my own life this “move” has become a practice that happens — in shortened form — dozens of times each day. Let’s try it together now. As you follow the practice below, notice the subtle kinesthetic sensations that occur in you. When you do this a number of times, those sensations will begin to elide, and the “practice” will happen almost instantaneously.

As you sit reading this, notice the clarity of your vision. Notice there’s nothing in the way of your seeing these words.

Now notice the clarity of the awareness in which these words appear. That clarity is unobstructed — there’s nothing in the way of the words appearing in your awareness; there’s no color or background, your awareness is perfectly clear.

Bring your attention now to the space between your forehead and the back of your head. Notice that the space inside your head is also perfectly clear. This clarity is emptiness.

Notice the sensations of your breathing. Notice how each inhale arises out of nothing and, at the top of your in-breath, it vanishes into nothing. Your out-breath does the same. Very gently, notice the space surrounding and pervading each breath. Recognize its clear, empty quality.

Now allow your intuitive openness to expand, seeing how this clarity, this empty quality, is not bounded by anything — it is all around and through you, it is everywhere, like space is everywhere.

There is nothing you need to do to “hold” this recognition of the empty quality that pervades you and all the people and phenomena you encounter; it is always present. Relax in, and as, this clear, empty presence.

This is the “intentional” aspect of this practice. What happens next is where the magic is: *baqa*; “standing up in a new way;” reentering the moment with “cleansed enthusiasm for particulars.” However this occurs will be unique to you and the moment you are part of.

The place where you stand up is the place where nothing and everything meet. It’s not a place where your intellect will be of much use. We might call it a “heart space,” though it’s a heart space that pervades reality, not just the space inside your chest. In the place where nothing and everything meet, love opens all by itself, amazed and kind and creative.

*Only this ancient love
circling the holy black stone of nothing,
where the lover is the love,
the horizon and everything in it.
— Rumi*