

The Wisdom School – Part 4: Emptiness and Ego

by Alan Krema / Originally published in Spirit Journal March 2016

Here is a great question on the contemplative life that was posed in a recent Living School student question forum:

“Reading Merton, consider the quote: ‘When I am devoid of thought I enter into the cloud of unknowing in which mind is pure but by no means blank, passive, or inactive. Emptiness is also a kind of fullness. Stillness is not dead or inert.’ How much kenosis? What does it mean to empty ourselves? We empty but not to nothing, not to passiveness, not to blank or dead or inert? How much ego is too much or too little?”



Photo: Simon Eugster

This is a question we all encounter in Centering Prayer practice. How still can I be? How quiet? How silent?

The question exposes our cultural upbringing. We have a need to be something, to know that we are on the right path, and to differentiate our state of being into something we know as the right way or the good way vs. the bad. We are embedded in a conception of the spiritual life that is based on a need to attain a sense of something, some higher being.

At the same time, the mind has thoughts, and we each create a narrative to define our individual “self,” derived from our thoughts. And, we find ourselves embedded in this individual body, which is in constant motion. The body has a driving energy in motion, impelled by desires for food, sleep, sensuality, serenity.

We are constantly thinking of who we are, what we are, and how we are. Who we are is conditioned by our identification with roles, and we all have many such

attachments. Maybe we have a job and family which is who we are on a routine basis, but we also have a story inside our head about who we are as helper, savior, lover, creator, writer, artist, etc.

We identify with these stories and cling to them. We believe they give us meaning; indeed, they give us something. Perhaps what they give is desire. We always want more, and want to be more. The spiritual path begins when we want to be more spiritual, to be a good person. But we always want this. The desire for this does not dissipate but finds its energy in all the details of our stories.

For example, let's say I want to be a better helper, so I involve myself in a form of activism. I might then feel justified in thinking that I am a better person (look at my acts of charity). However, the desire doesn't dissipate. Why do I still feel intensely that I need to be better when I have been doing all this good? I observe that my state doesn't change. I am always in need of this feeling: to do more and be better no matter how much I do and how hard I try. Any feelings of self-satisfaction over my activity are temporary, and I get a bit frustrated when, after years and years, my desires are still as intense, perhaps even greater as I grow older.

What can we observe that is going on here? We have developed as beings that need to characterize, categorize, differentiate our lives and tell a good story about it. However, somewhere on the road to wisdom, we begin to see not just *what* we are but *that* we are. We sense over time in retreats and meditation that there is a source to our being that is there, and has been there all along. It seems always to be there though we lose track of it in our busyness. This source of our being is often sensed as being "grounded." We feel we are connected to the earth in a vast feeling of being a wonderful – if small – part of this great world. We can access this sensation by placing our awareness in the body and allowing a sense of flow to happen from the core into the legs and, in a transcendent way, into the ground below us. We sense our flow into the earth and we sense the flow of the earth into us and upward through our body.

The source may also be sensed by placing our attention in our heart space. Here we sense a vast emanation of our body energy as well as a reception of energy from without. Our sense of self takes a much smaller space here than in our ego narratives, but a place is there for it nonetheless. There is also a sense of connection to other persons and the cosmos. A sense

that we all have a place, perhaps small in terms of ego story, but vast in that we are all connected to the same thing – the same source – the same universally shared sense of personhood that is beyond the individual story.

When our mind still follows a story that starts in some random desire, we continue to retain a sense of the source, and this perspective shows us how we can be good and maybe could be better. Our training helps us to let go of the limited, ego-driven story that our mind clings to so tenaciously. When we allow the thoughts and the story to flow into our heart space, our ego is not repressed, and the story is still there, but it takes its place in a smaller way within the vastness of who we really are, connected in a deep real way with others and the source we share. We as individuals are not repressed, inert, blank, dead, still, or passive. We hold the ego and all the identifications we cling to as our self, but now in a lightness of being. A being that is an agent for my ego and, at the same time, part of a vast connection to others and to the transcendent.

In this state of “heartful” awareness, I carry my ego with me, lovingly. I witness my ego-self and my transcendent self at the same time and in the same place. I can witness what I am and *that* I am simultaneously. True, I often lose sight of this witness in my addictive and reactive behavior, but I can continue to train myself to pay attention to my being. Pay attention to my feet, my core, my heart, and my mind all being together and being in connection to you and all others. Pay attention.

If you feel drawn to participate in a Contemplative Outreach Wisdom practice group, please feel free to email me at alkrema@gmail.com.