

# Cultivating the Empty Field

## The Silent Illumination of Zen Master Hongzhi

Article author: Elana, Scribe for [Daily Zen](#)

*Excerpted from Cultivating the Empty Field – The Silent Illumination of Zen Master Hongzhi - Taigen Dan Leighton with Yi Wu*

Hongzhi is a 12th century Chinese Zen Master who is mostly unknown to us today, but was an immense influence on Dogen. He was the first to articulate silent illumination, commonly known as “just sitting.” Although this meditation does not ultimately involve concentration on an object or stages of advancement, it is not without technique. In his Practice Instructions Hongzhi urges practitioners to “take the backward step and directly reach the middle of the circle from where light issues forth,” and elsewhere to “turn within and drop off everything completely, and realization will occur.”

Hongzhi’s meditation instructions describe, and evoke, the actual experience of enlightened, illuminating awareness. He wants each of us actually to experience for ourselves the vast empty shining field from which we have never been separate. “If you enact it in this way, how could it not be beneficial?”

### **The Practice of True Reality Part 1**

The practice of true reality is simply to sit serenely in silent introspection. When you have fathomed this, you cannot be turned around by external causes and conditions. This empty, wide-open mind is subtly and correctly illuminating.

Spacious and content, without confusion from inner thoughts of grasping, effectively overcome habitual behavior and realize the self that is not possessed

by emotions. You must be broad-minded, whole without relying on others. Such upright independent spirit can begin not to pursue degrading situations.

Here you can rest and become clean, pure, and lucid. Bright and penetrating, you can immediately return, accord, and respond to deal with events. Everything is unhindered, clouds gracefully floating up to the peaks, the moonlight glitteringly flowing down mountain streams. The entire place is brightly illuminated and spiritually transformed, totally unobstructed and clearly manifesting responsive interaction like box and lid or arrowpoints meeting.

Continuing, cultivate and nourish yourself to enact maturity and achieve stability. If you accord everywhere with thorough clarity and cut off sharp corners without dependence on doctrines, like the white bull or wildcat helping to arouse wonder, you can be called a complete person. So we hear that this is how one on the way of non-mind acts, but before realizing non-mind we still have great hardship.

### **The Bright, Boundless Field**

The field of boundless emptiness is what exists from the very beginning. You must purify, cure, grind down, or brush away all the tendencies you have fabricated into apparent habits. Then you can reside in the clear circle of brightness.

Utter emptiness has no image, upright independence does not rely on anything. Just expand and illuminate the original truth unconcerned by external conditions. Accordingly, we are told to realize that not a single thing exists. In this field birth and death do not appear.

The deep source, transparent down to the bottom, can radiantly shine and can respond unencumbered to each speck of dust without becoming its partner. The subtlety of seeing and hearing transcends mere colors and sounds.

The whole affair functions without leaving traces, and mirrors without obscurations. Very naturally mind and dharmas emerge and harmonize. An Ancient said that non-mind enacts and fulfills the way of non-mind. Enacting and fulfilling the way of non-mind, finally you can rest. Proceeding you are able to guide the assembly.

With thoughts clear, sitting silently, wander into the center of the circle of wonder. This is how you must penetrate and study.

## **The Practice of True Reality Part 2**

The practice of true reality is simply to sit serenely in silent introspection. When you have fathomed this, you cannot be turned around by external causes and conditions. This empty, wide-open mind is subtly and correctly illuminating.

Spacious and content, without confusion from inner thoughts of grasping, effectively overcome habitual behavior and realize the self that is not possessed by emotions. You must be broad minded, whole without relying on others.

Such upright, independent spirit can begin not to pursue degrading situations. Here you can rest and become clean, pure, and lucid. Bright and penetrating, you can immediately return, accord, and respond to deal with events. Everything is unhindered, clouds gracefully floating up to the peaks; the moonlight glitteringly flowing down mountain streams.

The entire place is brightly illumined and spiritually transformed, totally unobstructed and clearly manifesting responsive interaction like box and lid or arrowpoints meeting.

Continuing, cultivate and nourish yourself to enact maturity and achieve stability. If you accord everywhere with thorough clarity and cut off sharp corners without dependence on doctrines, like the white bull or wildcat (helping to arouse wonder), you can be called a complete person. So we hear that this is how one on the way of non-mind acts, but before realizing non-mind we still have great hardship.

### **Face Everything, Let Go, and Attain Stability**

Vast and far-reaching without boundary, secluded and pure, manifesting light, this spirit is without obstruction. Its brightness does not shine out but can be called empty and inherently radiant. Its brightness, inherently purifying, transcends causal conditions beyond subject and object.

Subtle but preserved, illumined and vast, also it cannot be spoken of as being or non-being, or discussed with images or calculations. Right in here the central pivot turns, the gateway opens.

You accord and respond without laboring and accomplish without hindrance. Everything turns around freely, not following conditions, not falling into

classifications. Facing everything, let go and attain stability. Stay with that just as that. Stay with this just as this.

That and this are mixed together with no discriminations as to their places. So it is said that the earth lifts up the mountains without knowing the mountain's stark steepness. A rock contains jade without knowing jade's flawlessness. This is how to truly leave home, how home-leaving must be enacted.

### **Contemplating the Ten Thousand Years**

Patch-robed monks make their thinking dry and cool and rest from the remnants of conditioning. Persistently brush up and sharpen this bit of the field. Directly cut through all the overgrown grass. Reach the limit in all directions without defining even one atom.

Spiritual and bright, vast and lustrous, illuminating fully what is before you, directly attain the shining light and clarity that cannot attach to a single defilement. Immediately tug and pull back the ox's nose. Of course his horns are imposing, and he stomps around like a beast, yet he never damages people's sprouts or grains.

Wandering around, accept how it goes. Accepting how it goes, wander around. Do not be bound by or settle into any place. Then the plough will break open the ground in the field of the empty kalpa. Proceeding in this manner, each event will be unobscured; each realm will appear complete.

One contemplation of the ten thousand years is beginning not to dwell in appearances. Thus it is said that the mind-ground contains every seed and the universal rain makes them all sprout. When awakening blossoms, desires fade, and Bodhi's fruit is perfected self.

### **Cultivating the Empty Field – Practice Instructions Part 3**

#### **The Amazing Living Beings**

Our house is a single field, clean, vast, and lustrous, clearly self-illuminated. When the spirit is vacant without conditions, when awareness is serene without

cogitation, then buddhas and ancestors appear and disappear transforming the world. Amid living beings is the original place of nirvana. How amazing it is that all people have this but cannot polish it into bright clarity. In darkness unawakened, they make foolishness cover their wisdom.

One remembrance of illumination can break through and leap out of the dust of kalpas. Radiant and clear white, the single field cannot be diverted or altered. Solitary glory is deeply preserved, enduring throughout ancient and present times, as the merging of sameness and difference becomes the entire creation's mother.

This realm manifests the energy of the many thousands of beings, all appearances merely this field's shadows. Truly embody this reality.

### **The Conduct of the Moon and Clouds**

The consistent conduct of people of the Way is like the flowing clouds with no grasping mind, like the full moon reflecting universally, not confined anywhere, glistening within each of the ten thousand forms.

Dignified and upright, emerge and make contact with the variety of phenomena, unstained and unconfused. Function the same toward all others since all have the same substance as you. Language cannot transmit this, speculation cannot reach it. Leaping beyond the infinite and cutting off the dependent, be obliging without looking for merit.

This marvel cannot be measured with consciousness or emotion. On the journey accept your function, in your house please sustain it. Comprehending birth and death, leaving causes and conditions, genuinely realize that from the outset your spirit is not halted. So we have been told that the mind that embraces all the ten directions does not stop anywhere.