

Meditation Month 2026 Video 1: Who Am I?

With Haemin Sunim, Korean Buddhist teacher and author

What is the most precious thing in the world?

What is the most precious thing in the world?

This question was posed by famous Korean Zen master Kusan Sunim to his followers, his Buddhist devotees. They would come to his temple and ask him to give a dharma talk. Then he asked this question, “What is the most precious thing in the whole world?” before giving his dharma talk. His devotee would say, “Well, I think it's my job that is the most precious thing. Because I work really hard to get to where I am in my company. I have a high position.” Or some people say, “Well, I spent a lot of years saving money. Therefore, my wealth is the most precious thing.” Or some mother would say, “Well, I think my family is the most precious thing. I love my husband, my wife, I love my children, my parents. They are the most precious thing.”

After listening to all those answers, Kusan Sunim said, “I actually think the most precious thing in the world is myself. If I did not exist, how would I know the importance of family, position, and wealth? Because I exist prior to all of them, I appreciate the preciousness, the importance, of those things that you just mentioned.”

Is it not the case, if we can be really, really honest about what is the most precious thing, then maybe we can conclude, just like what Kusan Sunim said, I am the most precious thing?

What's interesting, however, is that although people may agree that they're the most precious and important thing in the whole world, people are not very interested in getting to know themselves. Instead, they spend hours and hours trying to see what other people are doing—trying to read newspapers on what our politicians are doing, trying to watch TV dramas or movies, rather than turning their attention inwardly and trying to find the most precious thing. Instead, we turn our attention outwardly and try to just lose ourselves in the worldly experience.

Somebody may say, “Well, I think I know enough about me because I know I have these kinds of thoughts, I feel this way, and I have this body. Therefore, I am the collection of my memory, body, thoughts, and emotions. They are me.”

But what's interesting is this: If the body or our mind, our thoughts and emotions and memories, if all of them were “me,” then there has to be something else—a subject that is witnessing or observing them.

Anybody who practices mindfulness will quickly understand this: That is, when we sit and become mindful of our bodily sensations, thoughts, or emotions, they are the object, right? They are the object of our mindfulness. We can be aware of our body, thoughts, emotions, or memories. Then the question is, what is that which is aware of them?

In other words, we get confused. We, the subject, that which is witnessing or observing or experiencing, with the object. We think that we are mere objects. We are conditioned, impermanent objects.

But is it the case? Zen Buddhists, or [practitioners in] any wisdom tradition, may ask, "Is it the case? Am I just a mere object? That which can be observed, that which can be described?" Then what am I? That which is experiencing them all, because I can experience my body, I can experience my emotions—sadness, happiness, joy, anger, depression, jealousy, whatever, right? But we, the observer, witness, are not depressed. We're not sad, not any of those emotions, because we are mindful of them, the subject. We are mindful of those objects.

Then the question is, what is that which is aware of them?

What is that which knows the rising of those emotions and disappearing of those emotions? The rising of thought and disappearing of thought?

Some people might say, "I think I know who I am. I am Asian. I am male. I have either liberal or conservative political view. I am Buddhist." All those identities we acquire after we become older, and then we say, I am such-and-such. But those identities are not permanent. It is impermanent and conditional. It is something that we learn as we grow older.

Maybe your family had a political view of maybe holding on to liberal values or conservative values. Or your friend, your town, the neighborhood where you grew up, your best friend, they tend to have that particular type of political view, for example. Then you are conditioned to have or follow similar ideas. Even if you are going against them, you are still, nevertheless, conditioned. Then the question is, what was I before acquiring all those identities?

Because "I am the most precious thing," we believe, right, then what was I before? Prior to all those identities? This is the question that Zen Buddhists are asking.

We do it in a form of koan. So this week, I would like to present this koan, that is: What was my original face before my parents gave birth to me?

I want you to think about, hopefully write it down, and during the course of this week, I want you to contemplate on: What was I before I acquired all those identities, all those objects to be me? Where is the subject? Where is that which is experiencing them all?

My name is Haemin Sunim. I'm a Korean Zen Buddhist teacher. And I would like to invite you to have that particular experience that I'm just talking about through guided meditation.

In Zen traditions, their famous phrase is: Without relying on textual study or ritual, directly pointing to your true nature.

Meditation

So if you like, let's do a little bit of meditation. Can we sit straight and comfortably? We'll take five deep breaths. Take a deep breath. Two more. Last one. You can close your eyes or you can open your eyes, whichever you like.

To get to, "What am I before my parents gave birth to me?" I want you to imagine that you are actually going back to the time of your high school. You are a teenager, full of energy, many friends, high school life, your body was very healthy.

Now I want you to imagine you are an elementary school student. You are full of joy and young, maybe shorter, and happy, or not so happy.

Now I want you to remember yourselves as three years old. You've barely learned basic language and words. You are beginning to recognize your mother, your father, the world. You're beginning to become used to having simple conversations. You have a separate identity, you see your body when you look at your mirror. You begin to learn different words: tree, bird, grass, your brother, sister.

Now I want you to go back even further. You are maybe one year old. This is your pre-verbal period where when you open your eyes and look around the world, you don't know what things are called. None of it has a name. There are labels. And yet, it's there. They are vivid. Everything around you is mysterious, wonder. You don't know what they are because you don't know the words. They are there and yet you don't distinguish one from another, one from the rest of the world. You just experience them in awe with lots of curiosity, with a joyful heart.

If you close your eyes, I want you to open and when you open it, try to see the world from the eyes of one-year-old you. Notice that the world around you doesn't have any name, language, or words. With the absence of language and words, you cannot separate one from the rest of the world. Yet, it's alive, vivid, and wondrous. It's connected, undivided. You don't know where / starts and where / ends. In fact, you don't even have a separate concept of /. You look around the world with wonder and amazement.

We're gonna take three deep breaths. One, two, three. One, two, three. One, two, three.

So I want you to contemplate on this question of who am I? What am I before all my identity? What am I before identifying myself with objects.

Notice that whenever you identify yourself with something—let's say I identify myself with being Asian, then what happens is immediately non-Asian and Asian appear at the same time. Because when there is no non-Asian, it's impossible to be Asian, right? In order for you to become Buddhist, you need non-Buddhists. In order for you to be right, we are entirely depending on people who are wrong. Without those who are wrong, we can never be right. We are interdependent in that way.

But as soon as we say, “I am as such—Asian or Buddhist, liberal or conservative, or whatever that is, gender, your work identity, or your family identity, or whatever the identity that you happen to graft onto yourself—”then there are immediate divisions. Rather than looking at the world from the eyes of joy and wonder, you begin to assume that you already know. As soon as you hear people that are different from you, then you already have plenty of ideas, and thereby we tend to judge them and further deepen the illusion of separation.

So the koan “What was I before my parents gave birth to me?” is a call back to the innocent time. It's a call back to our fundamental, undefined, free, true nature.

Whatever the identity that you claim, that identity becomes a prison. What if you are more than those identities? What if you are undefined freedom?

This week, I want you to remember this koan. What was I before acquiring all this identity? What was I—that which is witnessing all of them?

This was Tricycle: the Buddhist Review's Meditation Month. This was the first week and I would like to see you again next week. Thank you very much.