

Meditation Month 2026 Video 2: Boundless Freedom

With Haemin Sunim, Korean Buddhist teacher and author

Hello, everybody. Welcome back to Tricycle Meditation Month. This is Hemin Sunim.

Last week, we worked on this koan, that is: What was I before my parents gave birth to me?
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The original koan was, what was our true face, our original face, before our parents gave birth to us?

This was a call to peel off any kind of accumulated identities or preconceived ideas about ourselves: label, name, whatever it was. It was asking us to see if we can free ourselves from all of them and return to the state of wonder, return to the childlike curiosity and joy.

In Buddhism, we want to arrive at unconditional freedom, and anything that is conditional, even if it looks really good, is ultimately going to bind us, or imprison us.

A good example would be somebody who defined themselves as being kind. "I'm a very kind person." Yet, sometimes you run into a situation where it is impossible to be kind. For example, somebody walks up to you and threatens the safety of you or your child or your dog. Could you be true to your kind nature? If you say, "I have to be kind because that's who I am," then you could become a victim of crime.

In other words, whatever we identify ourselves with—whether it is personality, memories, or identities—they also become our prison. Therefore, this koan is asking us to free ourselves, even if it's momentary, for a short period of time.

Also, this koan was a call to our pure awareness prior to all of those ideas and identities.

When we first learn Buddhism, we study that there is no self: selfless nature. Because we analyze that, what we consider to be self is nothing but five aggregates, or the five *skandhas*. They are our body, our emotions, our feelings, our thoughts, volition, and consciousness. When you examine [the self], what's really there? There is nothing but the five aggregates, or the five skandhas.

But in truth, all those aggregates, whether it's your body or feeling or your thoughts or volition or your consciousness, they are objects. They can be observed. You can perceive them, rising and disappearing of your thoughts and feelings. Our body, too, we can perceive this, right? Which

means that's not the subject. Because the subject is perceiving or observing. Then what is it that is knowing all of this?

Rather than reducing ourselves to be a mere object, such as our body, feeling, and thoughts, what is that which is observing? That which is knowing? That's the question.

I can observe my body, right? And I can observe the rising and disappearing of my thoughts. I can also observe how my emotions change—sometimes happy, sometimes unpleasant. Or whatever that you define yourself as such, even if it's a consciousness, if you define it, what you're doing is you're drawing boundaries. “This much is my consciousness.” And you are quickly turning whatever that experience is into an object.

So when you perceive an object, what happens? Well, instantly it creates a dualistic existence. I, as an observer observing the object. However, this koan is basically saying, “Hey, all those things that you have accumulated—labels, names, personality, memory, identities—they are all objects.” So it is calling you to come back: “Come back to your original nature before the subject-object split.”

I remember when I was 10 years old, and I was in Korea learning English for the first time. For the longest time, I thought *apple* was called *sagwa* (사과). In Korean, it's called *sagwa* (사과). And then my teacher said, no, in English, it is *apple*. Then I realized, “Oh, the word 사과 is just like apple. It is man-made.” We created this artificial word to communicate. But because we are so used to it, we forget that it is artificial. It is something that we accumulated. We created it later on.

If you really think about it, the idea of having a name is also strange. When you were just born, you didn't have any name. And somehow, because you had to communicate, your parents or your caregiver decided to call you whatever: Peter or Jennifer or Tom or whatever, right? How strange is that? Right?

Your true nature is nameless, defineless. So when we can let go of whatever the identity is that we are holding on to, there is freedom—a state of unconditional freedom. This freedom relates to what we are going to work on next koan.

This next koan basically suggests that the freedom has another quality: the quality not only of wonder and joy and an undefined quality, but it also has a quality of not knowing.

So let me introduce this koan, OK? Are you ready?

This week's koan is this: What is it that is not a thing, not the mind, not the Buddha? What is it? Let me repeat.

What is it that is not a thing, not the mind, not the Buddha? What is it?

This is perhaps one of the most famous koans in Korean Zen traditions, at least in contemporary times.

There was a very famous monk whose name was Seongcheol Sunim (1912-1993), and back in the 70s and 80s, many, many people visited him and asked for his guidance because they wanted to be awakened. Master Seongcheol Sunim would say, "OK, I can help you, but in order to receive my help, receive my koan, *hwadu*, you need to bow to Buddha 3,000 times." So if you are really honest and sincere, you really want to be awakened and really want to find your freedom, liberation to nirvana, then you would spend somewhere between eight to twelve hours bowing to the Buddha—3,000 times—and then the next day, they would go to his room. Then master Seongcheol Sunim would give this koan: What is it? That which is not a thing, not the mind, not the Buddha. What is it?

This koan is not necessarily to solve the problem. You know, some people mistakenly imagine that koan is some kind of riddle to solve. There is no concrete answer to it. Rather, it is an invitation to the state of mystery, the state before the subject-object split. It also has the quality of not knowing because we can only know that which is conditional. We cannot know unconditional things, right?

So let's just unpack it before we do meditation: What is it that is not a thing, not the mind, not the Buddha? Because it's not a thing, it means that it's not an object. It's not something that you can perceive and discover in this world because an object can be seen—you can identify it—but this is not a thing. This is not an object. So whatever that has the shape or form, that's not it. So anything you can know about, whether it's a flower or the Buddha statue or trees or whatever, that's not it.

Then it says it's not the mind. Because it's not the mind, it is not any kind of conceptual thought, any kind of concept that you come up with. Even if you call it freedom, even if you call it pure awareness, that's not it, right?

Where this koan tries to take you is a place where you forget—even if it's just momentarily—and arrive at an undefined experience, an experience of having no ground to set your foot on.

The last one is the Buddha, right? A lot of Buddhist people, as they meditate and as they do many different types of practices, they revere deeply and they want to become like the Buddha.

But oftentimes, they imagine Buddha having a certain kind of shape or form or some type of image. They imagine Buddha to be peaceful or Buddha to be blissful. Whatever that is, whatever your imagination of your enlightenment experience is, that's not it.

So then what is it?

What is it?

Again, it is the invitation to the realm of the unknown. Seungsahn Sunim (1927-2004), one of the most famous Korean Zen masters in the West, called it *don't-know mind*. So we are walking into don't-know mind, the mind of wonder, not knowing anything. Because only objects, only those things that have boundaries, we can know. We cannot know that which does not have a boundary.

It is like trying to conceptualize or trying to capture the experience of seeing perfect blue sky, cloudless blue sky, right? The other day, I was walking to my neighborhood, and there was a big football field, and then when I looked up, it was just beautiful, cloudless, perfect blue sky. There was nothing to grasp, nothing to pay attention to. There was no object.

In other words, you are walking into that space of freedom, that space of the unconditional. Rather than relying on something you already know and trying to compare and conceptualize what that freedom would look like, that's not it.

The mind always tries to find an answer. The mind does not like uncertainty. The mind wants to know. However, our life by nature is uncertain. And yet our mind wants to define it. So we try to ask questions and want to figure things out.

The whole challenge in the practice of koan is struggling with this particular set of habits in our mind that is always wanting to know, always wanting to find the answers, always wanting to find some kind of stable ground. But that stable ground is man-made, artificial, conditional, impermanent. That's not reality.

What this koan is asking you to do is to find groundless freedom.

Find yourself not as an object, not as the five skandas, not as defining yourself as just merely your body or your mind, the thoughts, or emotions, your volition, or your consciousness. There is something besides them. Or maybe there is nothing besides them. But whatever that is, I don't know. Can we walk into that experience of not knowing without trying to figure things out, without bringing all kinds of preconceived ideas, especially about Buddhism, especially about Buddhist doctrine, philosophy, something that you already learn from different teachers? Can

you try to see where this teaching fits in? Can you just stop all of that and walk into the mind of not knowing? Go beyond the concept, beyond the label, beyond our names, and identities, and whatever that is. There is our true nature.

Even the word true nature is empty of its own inherent existence. So I don't know what that is, but you ought to find out: What is it?

It is a call to realize your unconditional nature. Right? Unconditional freedom.

Meditation

So I would like to invite you to do guided meditation with me. So let's take a deep breath like three times. You can close your eyes if you wish or you can just remain open. One, two, three. One, two, three. One, two, three.

When you find yourself in this space of this quiet, peaceful moment, you're going to gently raise this question:

What is it that is not a thing, not the mind, not the Buddha? What is it?

Whatever the answer you come up with, that's not it, because the answer will always have a boundary. It will always end up being an object. What the koan is asking you to do is entering into boundless freedom, which has the quality of not-knowing. That is the state prior to object-subject splits. What is it?

If you can stay in this realm of not-knowing, which brings wonder and curiosity and freedom, that is your true nature.

That true nature is not something that you gain or garner through your effort. It is something that you always have: this unconditional freedom before identifying yourself with an object, prior to mistakenly believing that you are a mere object. Tap into this quality of unknown. You are boundless freedom.

You can take a three deep breath. One, two, three. One, two, three. One, two, three.

If you are a little scared of finding no ground underneath because your mind wants to set your foot on some kind of definite definitions or knowledge or some kind of notions, identity, then notice that it is just your ego that is scared. Your true nature is not scared.

So this week's assignment is, I want you to raise this question, what is it? There is no answer to it. There is no conceptual answer to it. You are just walking into the experience of not-knowing

while feeling peaceful. You are not struggling to find the answers and yet you are curious: What is it? Because you can be awakened to it.

So as you walk around, maybe in the morning time, you just walk around and ask yourself, what is it? Meet this experience of wonder, this experience of not-knowing. Through the eyes of not-knowing and wonder, you're going to see the beautiful trees and the sound of birds, your neighbor who is chatting, whatever that is. Please just meet the world with this mindset of not knowing and see what happens.

I will see you next week. Thank you. This was Haemin Sunim. Thank you.