

Meditation Month 2026 Video 3: Experiencing the Unknown

With Haemin Sunim, Korean Buddhist teacher and author

Welcome back everybody. This is the third week of Tricycle: The Buddhist Review's Meditation Month. The previous two weeks, we've been working on two different types of koans.

The first one was: Who was I before my parents gave birth to me? What was my original face before I was born into this world?

The second koan that we worked on last week is: What is it, that which is not a thing, not our mind, and not the Buddha? What is it?

These are the two questions we have been grappling with, or trying to come to terms with. Both koans are basically leading us to the experience of the unknown. Why? Because we do not know! We do not know the answer to the question of who was I before my parents gave birth to me. Do you know? It's impossible to know, isn't it? And equally, what is it that which is not a thing, not the Buddha, and not our mind, what is it? Whatever the answer you come up with is, it ends up being either a thing, object, or some sort of conceptual idea, label, name, or thought which happens within our mind, or some kind of idealized state of awakening or enlightenment. Whatever your imagination of what enlightenment should be, whatever that is, that particular imagination of your experience, all of which has its own limit. Only those that are limited, we can know. Only those that have a boundary, we can know. Only that which has a name, we can know.

But can you know that which does not have a name? Can you know that which is unlimited? It's impossible to know.

When you look at the sky, if there is a cloud passing by, then we can see the cloud and pay attention to the cloud, right? We can even say, oh, that cloud looks like an elephant, for example. But when there is not a thing, then there's nothing you can say about anything. There is nothing to know.

In this experience of the unknown, in Zen, Korean Zen master Seungsan Sunim (1927-2004) called it *don't-know mind*: the mind that doesn't know. This is the ultimate ground. This is the final destination where we all want to arrive.

As a young Buddhist student, I was a little bit disillusioned because all different traditions want to say our tradition is number one. The Tibetan tradition says our path is the highest and quickest way to obtain Buddhahood. And the Zen tradition also says contemplating koans is the quickest, best path. I'm sure also the Theravada traditions have their own bias, and they are very proud of their own tradition. They should be!

But I was wondering why on earth Zen traditions would claim that their path is the quickest. Then, after 30 years of my practice, I can tell you this: The reason why it is quickest is the beginning point of koan contemplation is the very end point, the very destination that you want to arrive at.

What is that? That is the experience of the unknown.

The experience of the unknown, the don't know mind, is the ultimate destination that we want to arrive at.

The problem is our mind always wants to question, wants to conceptualize and wants to compare from this tradition to another tradition, this teacher's teaching from another teacher's teachings, or how does that fit in to what I already know? You want to find the answer to the koan that has been presented.

So insofar as we are struggling to know, then although the answer, which is the experience of the unknown, is already presented in front of us, we refuse that is it.

We imagine that something better, something grander, more blissful, more amazing, spectacular, an otherworldly experience must be waiting for us. But whatever that has emerged, whatever that which didn't exist before and then it came to exist, sooner or later, what happened to that? That experience will also disappear. All of it is impermanent. No matter how spectacular, blissful, enlightened quote-unquote the experience is, where you want to arrive at is unconditional freedom. Not those conditional experiences, but unconditional freedom. That's where you want to arrive.

Unconditional freedom, another way of saying it, is uncaused. There is no cause for this liberation.

Some people say uncaused joy, or happiness without a cause. That's the experience where we want to arrive. There is no reason why you become happy. There is no manipulation, some sort of mental striving which allows you to have a momentary, blissful experience. That's not what we are looking for because all of those experiences are impermanent. It comes and goes, right?

Then what is that which is unconditional and uncaused?

Another way of saying it is unborn. Because it is unborn, it means it is deathless. It is deathless. It is the liberation. Then what is that?

Anything that has a limit, anything that has a boundary, we can know. But that which does not have a boundary, that which does not have a name or form, we cannot know.

However, when we say “the experience of the unknown,” our habitual conceptual mind feels frustrated, like that's not enough. “There has to be something better, something grander, something that I can understand.” But once that kind of struggle—to go other than what is, to go beside what is here and now—when all the struggles stop, or pause, through the power of koan meditation, then you realize the experience of the unknown is the experience of love.

In the experience of the unknown, there is no division.

Only when you know something, there is a division. Let's say I say, I know that I'm Asian, for example. So I know that I'm Asian. As soon as you say, “I know that I'm Asian,” then what you are saying is, “There is non-Asian.” You assume that somehow Asian can be independent, can stand alone and be Asian. Whereas the truth is, both this reality appears at the same time, and you artificially draw the boundary, saying that “This is Asian.” Seeing the empty nature of that line, the boundary itself was just artificially drawn. It is just heuristically, we are just creating it so that we can communicate. But in reality, there is no boundary. It is just conceptually existing, but not in reality.

That's what experience is. This no division. When you say, I love you, there is no division between me and you.

For example, only when we accept the fact that I don't know about the other person, we can remain curious. We can ask questions about who that person is and what that person did this week. But if you think you already know everything there is to know about that person, what do you do? We tend to make a judgment about that person. We stop being curious. Rather than try to understand, we think we already know. So we don't give them time and space for them to talk. Instead, we already assume that we already know. That's not love. That's not love.

One of the reasons why our children don't want to communicate with their parents is because they feel frustrated. “No matter what I say, you are not going to listen to me anyway.” Why? Because some parents can assume that they already know everything there is to know about children. And then children feel no love.

So when we bring ourselves to the mind of not-knowing, there is openness. There is no division. There is room to understand. There is the experience of oneness.

Another name for experiencing the unknown is peace. Because there is no division. There is no potential conflict.

When you feel very peaceful, what happens? Do you have a lot of judging thoughts in your mind? Or after all those thoughts of discontentment or judgment, what happens? You momentarily pause and become quiet. That's why this experience of the unknown, another name for it is peace.

If you say, "What I want is peace," we want to walk into the experience of the unknown.

It is a little bit like when you are listening to music, and you can listen to different notes: high pitch or low pitch or loud sound or very small, quiet sound. Somebody's singing, for example. But when those songs become quiet, when the song stops, what happens? An underlying silence is revealed. Everything appears: all this music appears within the underlying experience of silence. This silence is uncaused, unconditional.

Can you do something to cause silence to emerge? No, you can't. It's always there. It's just that we make a lot of noise and sound, and thereby we think that silence is not there. But it is sort of unconditional, like the very ground of all sound.

I would like to introduce a new koan today. While we are keeping in mind the experience of the unknown—that is when we feel love—see if there are a lot of judging thoughts, a lot of mental noise within, or whether it's very quiet, yet receptive and open. Bring the attitude of, I don't know everything, and curiosity. That's the experience of the unknown.

We are going to move on to the third koan. This koan will open up another dimension about our ultimate nature, which is the unknown. That is, the unity, non-dual experience, non-duality.

The koan goes something like this:

If all returns to one, if all returns to one, where does the one return?

Let me repeat. If all things in the world return to one, where does the one return?

It's a curious koan isn't it? When you finally begin to experience all things in this universe as that non-dual experience, then where does that oneness return?

What do you think? Where does that one return?

Basically, if you examine the experience of the unknown and see that it entails the experience of no division—no subject-object divisions and nothing between the seer and the seen—it means everything that you see in the world, rather than seeing them as thousands and millions of different things, you begin to see that there is one underlying reality.

If you are awakened to that one underlying reality, where does that one underlying reality return?

Let me just break it down a little bit. The first part: one underlying reality. What does that mean?

When you look at the ocean, we can see lots of different waves. Sometimes it's a very high tidal wave. Sometimes it's really strong, like a tsunami—a huge, big surge of a wave. Or sometimes it's like the white, bubbly, small wave you see, especially when the weather is good, right? And many different types of wave you can detect and differentiate, right? However, if you can ask yourself, what is the nature of those waves? There are many different shapes and forms, but what is the wave made of? Then you realize it is made of water, right? It's made of water. So no matter what kind of wave you see, if you just shift your mind away from the shape and form, or the name, the label, and shift it to its nature—what is that which is made of?—then you realize, it's all water. Once the water realizes itself as water, can the ocean, the water, ever be afraid of big waves?

Have you ever seen the ocean being afraid of its own big wave? Of course not. Because no matter what kind of form and shape it has, what does it mean? It is the same water, right?

Likewise, do you cook? I don't know whether you are a good cook, but sometimes I make a noodle dish, or sometimes I enjoy different pastries. This morning I had a bagel. Sometimes you can have a croissant. But what are bagels, or noodles, or pasta, or croissants, made of? What's the very nature of pasta? What is the very nature of a croissant? Then you see that all of them are made of what? Flour, right? All of them are made out of flour. So, very substance—if you just zoom out, rather than looking at the form and shape and differences and names, like a name such as bagel or croissant or pasta or Asian noodle—and then you look at what it is made of, you realize they are all made of what? Just flour. Likewise, you can see that the reality that you see in front of you, when you are tapping into the experience of the unknown, then you cannot differentiate. You cannot distinguish one from another.

And yet, everything is somehow included in this oneness. Everything is somehow included in this oneness. Isn't this very curious?

Everything is included in this oneness, although I do not label them and therefore separate one from the rest of the world. They are all included in this oneness.

Some traditions call it non-duality or non-dual experience. When you go to a Buddhist temple in Korea, the first gate that you go through is called the gate of non-duality, or the non-duality gate. It usually has two pillars and then it's connected and then it says gate of non-duality. That's where you go inside.

So just pause and take a look around without using words, labels, or names, and see how everything is appearing in this field of awareness.

In this field, something that I do not know, everything is appearing at the same time, including “I.” This body appears all together.

Have you ever experienced the world appearing alone apart from you? Of course not, right? Or the other experience: Have you ever seen yourself appearing alone and then the world is not appearing? Of course not.

This experience of this whole universe in front of you, it always includes what I call “I” and the world appears simultaneously at the same time without any kind of demarcation other than the human artificially granted one.

So can we just peacefully look around and see the world?

Take a look around your room without using the words, without distinguishing one from another. See how everything is connected. How everything is revealed in this field of awareness.

When all things, or if all things, return to one—this experience of non-duality, which is the experience of the unknown—whichever has a form, it can have a cause. Thereby it becomes conditional. But something that is unknown doesn't have any form or shape. Therefore, you cannot cause the unknown to appear. This is the experience of unconditionality.

Then, where does that one return to? Where does that one return to?

We encounter many teachers, talking about non-dual experience or experiences of oneness: “I and the universe is the one, I feel like I am the tree and tree is me, and I feel like all connected,” all of that. I had that experience actually about, I don't know, 10 years ago, and I went to my Zen teacher and he said, “Oh, it's good that you have this experience of oneness.” And then he asked this question, that is:

“If all things return to one, well, where does the one return?”

Meditation

So I would like to invite you to quietly contemplate this koan.

Let's take three deep breaths. One, two, three. One, two, three. One, two, three. You can close your eyes or, if you wish them to remain open, you can do that too. Then you are going to quietly ask:

If all things return to one, where does the one return?

In other words, if everything is one, what is the one? Or, where is the one?

If all things return to one, where does the one return? If all things return to one, Where does the one return?

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

If you don't know the answer, that's very good.

But if you try to come up with some answers, whatever they are, whatever the answers are, see that that is just a fragment, not the totality, just a fragment of whatever that is.

Where you want to arrive is this experience of the unknown.

It is available right here, right now.

As long as we are struggling and trying to imagine that it has to be somewhere better, this cannot be the "it," then our spiritual journey will continue.

When I was younger, I thought that meditation would lead to something amazing, spectacular, or at least to a peaceful, happy, and quiet experience. Something nicer than what was. Later I realized what I was doing was I was subtly resisting what is.

If you look at the three delusions—the reasons we are stuck in samsara, not in nirvana—one of the three poisons is what? Hatred, right? Or desire, hatred, or delusion, right? And then what hatred here means, aversion here means is you are subtly resisting to what is. You are wishing it to be different.

That subtle resistance is the very cause of samsara.

It's not that nirvana is somewhere else. Nirvana is right here. And yet, you are subtly resisting what is. That resistance, the pause, the stop, of that resistance, will reveal nirvana right here.

If you are still looking for enlightenment—otherworldly, fantastic, something different than what is—then you are still perpetuating the three poisons.

It's not that nirvana is not here; it is just that your restless mind is causing you not to see what is already here, which is unconditional, unborn ground.

All three koans that we've been studying are all leading us to the question—to the experience of the unknown. This leading us, this experience of the unknown, is here and now.

Yet, when you go out to the world with the mind of “I don't know,” or don't-know mind, you feel love, connection, joy, and peace because you're not asking somebody, something else besides what is. Because you're looking for somebody else besides what is, that's what's causing you not to experience peace.

So the assignment today is to use any of the three koans that speaks to you. Either, “What was I before my parents gave birth to me?” Or, “What is it, that which is not a thing, not our mind, or the Buddha?” Or, the third question, “If all things return to one, where does that one return?”

If any of these koans lead you to experience the unknown, then that's a big success!

With that don't-know mind, I want you to go out, take a walk, and look around, and see, experience everything as it is, and see if peace is there. See if love without cause, peace without cause, is there or not.

Thank you so much for spending time with me. My name is Hemin Sinim and I hope to see you next week. Thank you.