

Meditation Month 2026 Video 4: Experiencing the Unknown

With Haemin Sunim, Korean Buddhist teacher and author

Welcome back to Meditation Month with Tricycle: the Buddhist Review. This is our final week, and I would like to first express my gratitude for all those of you who are continuing to practice until this final week. I really, really appreciate it.

We've been contemplating on three different koans so far. The first one, let me just remind you, was, "What was my original face?" "What was my true nature before my parents gave birth to me, prior to when we were born?"

This koan was essentially asking you to strip away all that accumulated conditioning—the identities and things you hold onto as an independent, separate self—and see if you could just stay and get in touch with the pure awareness [that existed] before you accumulated so many layers (our different names, status, position, memory, whatever definition you are hanging on to). Because all those wonderful statuses, identities, names, and memories that you hang onto, that define you, are also what binds or imprisons you, making it difficult to experience unconditional freedom, which is called nirvana.

So put aside your preconceived ideas about who you are, and see if you can just walk around with curiosity and a mind of wonder.

This feeling of "I don't know anything, I don't have any labels or names or language, and yet everything in front of me is vivid," is interesting. It's wonderful. That was the first challenge, the first koan.

The second koan we contemplated was, "What is it that is not a thing, not the mind, not our thoughts or our emotions or our feelings, and also not the Buddha?" Any type of idealized understanding of the ultimate nature.

If we can just tap into this undefinable, beyond any kind of categorization or any kind of mental grasping, if we can just tap into the reality of the unknown, then something amazing is waiting for us. That is, "Wow, I thought I knew everything to be independent and separate because I categorized them. I used language, and by assigning different words, I assumed that each and every object has independent and inherent existence." And yet, when we try to look for what it is, we see the emptiness of all this categorization, the emptiness of all these names. And then we are tapping into this experience of the unknown where the unity—everything you see and feel—there is non-dual reality.

It is not to say the flower, for example, or the tree, don't exist. They do! It's just that our mental conceptualization blocks us from seeing the oneness of all things.

So the second koan was challenging you, the students, the practitioners, to see if you can go beyond names and labels, and rather than seeking in any kind of objective experience—that is the experience that has a form or shape or name—and tap into the reality which is in front of you that is not defined by those terms.

The third koan that we contemplated last week was, “If all things return to one, where does the one return? Where does the one return?”

It’s such an interesting koan, isn’t it? Because if all things return to one—that is, “Yes, Haemin Sunim, I get it. Yeah, everything is interconnected. There is no separate nature. Everything is just one non-dual state”—and you have this idea that, “Oh, I see, everything is one,” you might be still hanging on to this concept of oneness, for example, and rather than entering into the unknown, you are subtly hanging on to this idea that everything is non-dual.

[In other words the], very teaching tool that we use—like non-duality or everything is one, interdependence, all of that—in the Zen tradition, they want to say, “Hey, hey, hey, you know, all those categorization teaching tools, they were useful, however, they are not true. You have to let them go.”

Even the oneness, the concept, even the concept of the Buddha, enlightenment—whatever it is—because that is just a concept, or mental grasping still.

In other words, as long as we have subtle mental grasping, as long as we are trying to understand what the koan means and thereby trying to figure things out or wishing the experience to be different than what is—that is, as you meditate, you are hoping that somehow this meditation will lead me to something other than what is—all of this is grasping. You see? If you can just put aside all that mental grasping and then ask this question—“If all things return to one, where does the one return?”—then what happens is we are again experiencing the unknown.

Although I say it is the experience of the unknown, it isn’t exactly an experience because experience usually has an objective quality. That is, you are experiencing something. For example, you experience the taste of an apple. Or you experience travel to different parts of Asia—to China, Japan, Korea, or Europe. Generally, when you say experience, you’re experiencing something, an object. However, this experience of the unknown does not have any objective quality in it. So you cannot even say “experience” because there is no beginning and there’s no ending.

When you are walking into “the experience of the unknown,” where does that experience start and where does that experience end? There is no beginning point and there is no ending point. It is unlimited. Right? It is also unborn. It is not something that you can cause. You cannot just

practice hard and try hard to arrive at the unknown because all your effort that you make is usually trying to get to something that you know—to the known. Whatever the conceptualization of the Buddha or enlightenment or nirvana is, insofar as you are hanging on to any idea and hoping that you are somehow turning that idea into reality, all of that is not nirvana because you are assuming that unconditional freedom can be caused. But it's a causeless freedom. So no matter how much effort that we put into, that effort is not going to cause us to experience unconditional freedom. Why is that? It is because unconditional freedom is our true nature. It's already, we already have it.

That's why you have already arrived at the destination. And that's why you cannot try to arrive at the destination.

It's like somebody trying to get to New York City by asking people around Grand Central in New York and saying, "Oh, I want to go to New York. I heard that it takes many, many years to get there, a lot of energy and money and what can I do?" There's nothing you can do to arrive in New York because you are already there.

Likewise, it's a silence. You cannot try hard to create silence. You can create music that has a form and shape. However, silence, the underlying reality of all sound, has no cause. You cannot try hard to create silence.

So this is the mystery of our practice. That is, in the beginning, we think that somehow we have to make a lot of effort. We have to trust in the Buddha, dharma, and sangha. We have to learn the many, many great teachings of our teachers and patriarchs and whoever. Then we realize at the end that whatever we've been hoping to obtain, it has always been in our own pocket.

Another very interesting thing about the third koan that we just studied is the second part. We didn't actually discuss it last week. That is, if all things return to one, where does the one return? Where does the one return? Where do you think the one returns? Where do you think the one returns?

If everything is one, and nothing can be outside of the one, is there any place that the one can return?

There is no other place. You see what I mean? Not only is it trying to make you go beyond the concept and let go of conceptualization of the one, non-duality, all these fancy words, but also, what the koan is suggesting is, when you can just resolve everything to one, you realize that there is one seamless reality that is everywhere, and there is no further place to go.

You realize that you have arrived at your destination.

You see what I mean? Because if everything is “the one,” you wouldn't even use the word “the one” because “the one” assumes that there is a two or three or four. But if everything is just singular, undivided, naked reality, then you would not even use the word “the one,” right? And then you would not try to go somewhere else either. Right? Since everything is interconnected and everything is just one seamless reality.

This can be easily found if you just look around.

If you just look around, what we call “I”—the body, which is an object, we talked about it, it's not the subject—the body and the world appear in seamless one reality. Right? It's not like the world appears separately, independent of me. It appears all at the same time in this seamless whatever this is. Call it awareness or whatever.

Similarly the fourth koan that we are going to contemplate on today, it extends this same teaching. That is, where does the one return?

Back in 9th-century China, the great Chan master Zhaozhou (in Korean, we say Joju) received a student who asked him, “Master, tell me the meaning of Bodhidharma coming from the West? What is the meaning of Bodhidharma coming from the West?” Basically, what the student was asking is, what is the essence of Zen? What is the essence of Zen? Tell me the essence of Zen. And then the master, Joju, said, “The pine tree in the courtyard.” They were sitting in front of the courtyard, and there was a pine tree. So the master basically directed the student's attention [to the tree.] “Hey, that tree you see outside, that's the ultimate, that's the true essence of Zen.”

In other words, “enlightenment,” or the “pure awareness,” whatever that you are hanging on to, it's not a sublime or otherworldly and transcendental experience. It is grounded, anchored in our everyday living.

Because if everything is one, returned to one, then anything can be what? The ultimate.

So this is a very curious thing about buddha-nature or nirvana or whatever you call it. It's not something that is so different from our ordinary life. In fact, the more awakened you are, the more ordinary you behave. Because the ordinary mind is the awakened mind.

So let me say a little bit more about this. Because a lot of great teachers that I've met never pretended to be somebody other than a simple human being. They don't have any aura of, “I am special or I'm a guru,” those kinds of feelings. In fact, they are often childlike—innocent—and they laugh and cry and live seemingly normal human lives. Why? Because the ultimate reality that we imagine, it's not separate from our ordinary living experience.

So if somebody says, “What is the Buddha?” You can say, “My cell phone is my Buddha. My cup is Buddha.” Everything is Buddha, right? This is illustrating the eminent nature of the buddha-nature. Eminent. So it has two different qualities. The first one is transcendental, in a sense that maybe I can use the example of mirror, or maybe the example of television. The television screen has many different shows. But even if a drama is about war—like the Vietnam War, Korean War, or whatever the very scary war is—the TV screen itself is not terrified. Right? It does not share the destiny of the people inside the movie. Just because the main character dies, the TV screen does not die. It has a transcendental nature. However, the TV screen itself, the drama, cannot be separated from the TV itself, the TV screen. The TV screen is the drama. You see what I mean? So there is this knowing of your true nature, which is unborn and it cannot be defiled. It's pristine, immaculate. At the same time, it participates in the world. And that's where this bodhisattva path comes in.

That is, we live as a bodhisattva. We know everything that appears, that has a form and shape, can come and go. But that which knows what's coming and going is not moving. It doesn't disappear. It is the suchness: Tathagata. But at the same time, this suchness has the texture and form and shape, the experience of everyday living, which is not separate from the transcendental, from the unborn nature.

So, here is the question. What is the essence of Zen?

The essence of Zen is the pine tree in the courtyard. Or you can say that it's the TV or computer monitor or your mobile phone, through which you are watching this.

Very ordinary living itself has a transcendental nature. It cannot be separated.

This koan illustrates a profound truth. We talked about in our first week that whatever we see and feel and conceptualize, we can only conceptualize or see things that are objects, right? So if we're really curious about “What am I,” we ought to be curious about that which is seeing the object, not the object itself. Remember that? What we should be curious about is not the object—like our body, because our body can be seen. Or our mind—our thoughts and emotions—because we can write them down and express them to other people. This means all of them can be observed, which means there is an observer besides the object itself. Then this question is what is this subject?

What is that which is seeing, that which knows?

What's curious is this: That which knows and the very thing they know is one and the same.

That is the most astonishing discovery.

If you really examine it, like for example, you see me, Hamin Sunim, in front of you, right? And the fact that Haemin Sunim is in front of you and the knowing of Haemin Sunim is in front of you, are they two different things or are they one singular thing? One singular experience?

In other words, knowing the object and the object itself, when we experience it, do they have it as a two different experiences, like two different experiences happening at the same time, or is it just one experience? Is the subject that knows the object and the very thing that is the object itself, we assume that there are two separate things: subject and object. But in our actual experience, what we discover is there is no subject and object separation.

Just try it. The very thing, like your cell phone, if you're looking at your mobile phone, the fact that the mobile phone is there and the fact that I know that the mobile phone is there, is this two different experiences or the same experience? It is the same experience, isn't it? There's one singular experience. That's all we have. In other words, the subject and object, the separation, a distinction, is just a mental conception. So in reality, there is nothing but the one.

Therefore, what the koan that we just studied tries to illustrate is the pine tree in your garden is the ultimate. It is the people you meet; they are the Buddha, they are the ultimate. They are manifested as your neighbor, co-worker, or family member.

Some people might say, "What about people that I don't like? I don't see them as the Buddha. I don't see them as ultimate nature." But it is just like asking the TV screen, "Do you dislike the villain? Do you select which one to appear and which one not to appear? Or do you just let any drama to appear as it is?" Any drama appears as it is, without any choice, without any preference, without any "that is good versus that is not good," without your judgment. It all accepts what is.

Of course, people will say, how can I accept all these evil, difficult, horrible things? Well, it is like if you only think that something is evil, difficult, and challenging thing, horrible things, then it would be very difficult to accept it. However, if you see yourself not as the object, not as the drama on your TV screen, but as the TV screen itself, knowing whatever happens, your unborn nature, your deathless nature, cannot be disturbed, this unconditional freedom from any drama that is happening is not something that you have to gain. It's not something that you can lose.

From that understanding we can be a bodhisattva. That is, when we see suffering, we don't just sit there and then say, "Hey, everything that I see is just an illusion, just drama on a TV, and I am the TV screen or I am the mirror reflecting all these images and am thereby completely detached. No, no, no, no, no.

Because we are the one, we are everything, naturally, it also has the quality of bodhisattva mind. That is, it invites us to go into the world and help them because that's our true nature. So you go into the world as a bodhisattva and help other people while knowing that none of them actually exists independently.

Meditation

So I would like to invite you to our final meditation. Let's take a three deep breath. One, two, three. One, two, three. One, two, three.

What is the essence of Zen? The master answers, "The pine tree in the courtyard."

The pine tree in the courtyard.

The pine tree in the courtyard.

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

Before I let you go, I just want to share my own personal story. When I was young, I thought that by going to the United States, maybe I would find happiness there. Maybe I would find something better, something more amazing. So I was in California, attending university there, and as I was finishing my program, I thought, well, the real America, it must exist not along the West Coast. I haven't really seen the real America. That should be along the East Coast, like New York and Washington, D.C., or Boston, or something like that. So by going to those places, I imagined that I would be able to find what I'm looking for. And then I managed to get myself accepted to one of those schools along the East Coast. So I studied there for many years. And then I realized that, oh, the problem wasn't necessarily the place, because when I got to California or when I got to Boston, I was still unsatisfied.

No matter what kind of experience I had, I thought something better must be there somewhere else. As I was studying Buddhism and practicing meditation and all that, I realized I have the same tendency. That is, I imagine that nirvana or *satori* or awakening, it has to be something better than what is. Where I am, it's just not good enough.

Then, as I was studying more and more, I realized what was preventing me from arriving at *satori*, or awakening, or nirvana, or unconditional freedom, was the very searching, the mind of wanting besides what is. That was the problem.

So insofar as I am being restless and trying to get to other than what is, other than this present moment right here, right now, and not accepting this is the ultimate, and imagining the ultimate should be somewhere in the future after practicing many, many years following different teachers in a monastery or in a retreat—that assumption, that trying, hoping that you get to somewhere else, that is the cause of samsara.

Arriving at where you are and seeing what you've been looking for has been right here, right now, as your mind stops grasping, as your mind stops resisting, that's nirvana. That's where unconditional freedom is.

Because as long as you're looking, as long as you're seeking something else, there is no freedom.

When the seeking stops, you realize you've been stepping on unconditional freedom all along. Nirvana is not a state. It's not a destination. It doesn't exist in time or space. When all those efforts that you try to make to get to somewhere else stops, then you realize what you are, and what you have been looking for, has been always waiting for you.

My name is Hemin Sunim, and if you want to study more about what we just discussed, I have made a great tricycle teaching series, *Awakening Here and Now*, and you can maybe study there more if you want to study in depth. And I do have three books, including *The Things You Can See Only When You Slow Down*. And you can also read my book and find more about it. I also offer retreats in the U.S. and in Europe. And if you can check out my website, you will be able to find out more. Thank you very much.