

## **What is Kensho?**

### **By Fr. Gregory Mayers**

“When Wanshi Shōgaku (*Hung-chih Cheng-chio -1091-1157*) was asked, 'How is it that substance is lacking in the reality of purity and Void?' he replied: 'It is the instant of origin where refinement has not yet made any marks, and the moment when a message has not yet been conveyed.’”

*Recorded Dialogues of Ch'an Master Ta-hui*

#### ***Kensho View – No Outside or Inside***

*Kensho* is a Buddhist term for enlightenment, but the experience of *kensho* is not confined to Buddhism. Meister Eckhart calls it a “breakthrough”. St. Simon the New Theologian calls it “waking up” inside Christ's body.

Most of the knowledge we have of *kensho* consists of testimonials from people who have undergone it. Here are some of the ways the *kensho* occasion has been reported:

“I wasn’t there.” “There was only the tree.” “A sense of utter liberation and bliss.” “It is overwhelmingly positive.” “It’s like being drunk, but on reality.” “It’s more real than real.”

In a way, these accounts are about as helpful as a couple showing you the pictures of their recent vacation. While they might be enthusiastic about their remembered experience, you, being on the outside of that experience, will hardly be able to share in their gusto.

The Shambhala Dictionary of Buddhism and Zen (Shambhala Publications, Inc.; Boston 1991) provides the following definition of *Kensho*:

“*Kensho* is usually translated ‘self-realization.’ Like all words that try to reduce the conceptually ungraspable experience of enlightenment to a concept, this one is also not entirely accurate and is even misleading, since the experience contains no duality of “seer” and “seen” because there is no “nature of self” as an object that is seen by a subject separate from it.”

This description is about as satisfying and helpful as saying that Paris is a European city known for its lights, but it doesn’t have more lights than any other European metropolitan area.

I hope to give a clearer explanation of *Kensho* that is a bit more contemporaneous and relevant, and thus more accessible to the current age. In order to do this, it would be beneficial to clarify the ambiguous term “knowledge,” since it is obvious from the examples above that experiencing a vacation and recalling a vacation are two different kinds of knowledge.

## ***Knowledge***

Epistemology is the study of how we know what we know, and all the various intricacies of knowledge. The theory of knowledge is also known as “disambiguation,” which is a very good way of phrasing it since the word “knowledge” gets all tangled up when used in daily life. I could say I know mathematics, I know my dog, or I know it will rain today. All those ways of 'knowing' are different enough to make “knowledge” confusing or ambiguous. Let's see if we can untangle the knotty problem of knowledge and bring some clarity and understanding to it.

In our human experience there are at least two major dimensions or spaces in which we live: the exterior and the interior. It is obvious that there are things exterior to me, all the objects I can observe around me at this moment; and things that are interior to me, such as my feelings and thoughts. For example: if I look at the exterior, I see the brain; if I look through the interior, I see the mind. Furthermore, both of these dimensions have an *outside* or outer view and an *inside* or inner view. If I want an exterior *outside* view of the brain, I can open the skull and peer at the organ called the brain. If I want an exterior *inside* view of the brain I hook up a bunch of electrodes that record the electrical impulses of the organ through an EEG and read the record, or I run the brain through an fMRI and watch which parts light up.

Both the outer and inner exterior tells you something about the human event, knowledge which is very useful for many different purposes. But it doesn't tell you everything. There are some things that the exterior dimension can't detect no matter how accurate the instruments or how long one gazes at the brain. Staring at the brain or reading an fMRI record won't show you attraction, beauty, truthfulness, love, repulsion, sadness, streams of consciousness or the thought process. Those are interior realities.

You can know beauty, truth, attractiveness, and goodness. All those intangible qualities are real and have real effects—but only as an interior reality. You can appreciate the interior from the inside which is to say, how it feels, its mood and the “sense” of it. Or you can comprehend the interior from the outside; what it's made of, what its parameters are, what events compose it.

Take the example of dreaming at night and analyzing the dream the next morning. Dreaming is an inside interior view. Analyzing your dream is an outside interior view. Take the example of engagement with art. Listening to Vivaldi's *The Four Seasons* is an interior *inside* view while analyzing the musical structure of the score is an interior *outside* view. Both outer and inner are *interior* views. Dreaming and listening to Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* is an insider's view while analyzing your dream in the morning, or the structure of Vivaldi's composition is an outsider's view.

To summarize: knowledge of the *exterior* maps things that occupy physical space; knowledge of the *interior* maps things that don't occupy space but have an effect nonetheless. Furthermore, an *outside interior* view shows the boundaries of knowledge, while an *inside interior* view show the horizon or the landscape of knowledge.

## ***Outer Views' Patterns and Pasts***

There are two qualities about an outer view that are true of all outer views, whether of interior or exterior dimension. Outer views give us knowledge of patterns. Another word for patterns is *habits*. Secondly, all knowledge of patterns is knowledge of the past. Because nothing travels faster than light and light travels at 186,000 miles per second, there is a lag time in all knowledge.

Patterns allow us to see through them—like templates—to the cosmos in which we are. The present moment called NOW inherits the patterns from the last moment, which inherits the patterns of the previous moment, and so on. (This was Alfred North Whitehead's seminal insight, which he called "prehension".) The older the patterns or habits, the less wiggle room they offer for variances from the pattern. So the present moment is experienced through layered habits of ever-increasing age and stability. And it is a great advantage. First of all, the cosmos doesn't have to reinvent the wheel, starting at square one in each moment (this sets up the conditions for the evolutionary process). And secondly, the present moment is fairly predictable.

Except when it isn't. There is one critical trait or characteristic of NOW that makes it distinctly unlike all past occasions; namely, this NOW before I can say or even begin to think "now", has the unique trait of unpredictability. Unpredictability is another way of saying it is pattern-less or habit-less. There is something analogous to a thin creative edge in this occasion we name "now"—call it the leading edge of now—that is unformed or formless. It is *influenced* by past habits, but not *determined* by them. That leading edge is timeless and spaceless. Since time is the measure of change, as Augustine says, changelessness equals timelessness.

99.99% of the time we feel or experience the world and life through the template of habits, and not just personal habits, but the vast array of impersonal cosmic patterns that determine so much of what we consider to be reality. Kensho is that occasion when consciousness spontaneously and unexpectedly breaks through the patterned givens in this moment into the thin leading edge of now's formless creativity. Since that leading edge isn't inhibited by the past or by patterns or habits, one's vista is utterly free.

People who have not undergone kensho often mistake it for a satisfying or revelatory or intuitive insight. Insight is when the patterns fit together yielding a new understanding or view of reality. You see the patterns different. It is a new gestalt. Kensho is seeing an entirely unheard of reality, reality without habit or pattern. Instead of yielding new content and context, it is consciousness itself without content or context.

## ***Leading Edge of Now***

Here is the most important point. The leading edge of now has no outside since it has no patterns to define an outside. Since there is no outside, there is no inside either. There are no patterns—no inhibiting habits circumscribing Now. It is essentially liberated from the mold of the past and so it is unexpected. The way the Heart Sutra puts it is: "Form is nothing other than emptiness and emptiness is nothing other than form." No outside and no inside—literally “not-two”.

This is not an inner or an outer view. It is an entirely new and previously unknown and unanticipated “view”, a view-less “view”. This is kensho. It is what John of the Cross meant when he said in one of his minor poems: “I entered into unknowing... and when I found myself there, without knowing where I was I understood great things...I shall not say what I saw for I remained in unknowing...this is the finest sense of the essence of God.” It is without the dichotomy of inside/outside, but still interior. It isn't that one's molecules meld with everything else into a mushy mess, which would be an exterior reality. Rather one's interior reality momentarily sheds all the patterns and habits that inhibit one's interior view or consciousness.

This makes kensho liberating. It isn't just thinking outside the box, it is *being* outside the box. It is consciousness as such, free of all things, all events and all occasions and thus available for all things, all events and all occasions. As Thomas Cleary describes kensho, it is the freedom to experience experience.

Why don't I see it right now, since, if what you say is true, it is obviously *right now*? There may be many reasons, two fundamental that deserve attention. 1) You don't want it to be *right now*. You want it to be anything else: you want it better, or bigger, or finer, or later; anything but *now*. Another way of saying it is that we will not give up the comfort of our patterns. We use (or abuse) the patterns of the cosmos for our benefit instead of letting them use us. This leads to the second reason. 2) You are absolutely terrified by the fact of your own death. The price of admission to kensho is death of self. And our terror of death is our last stand defense against our own liberation.

Our spiritual practice is nothing other than letting go. Letting go of our illusions, of this thing I call myself. That is certainly terrifying to the self that thinks it is so real. Nonetheless, letting go is the way to liberation from all our suffering and distress. In the end, what we ultimately let go of... is nothing at all.

Never has been. Never could be.

What a relief!