

Depth & Breadth of Concentration – Part 2 of 3 ~ Shinzen Young

00:00:00 As I say, this was one of the things that really sold me on the whole meditative endeavor

00:00:11 initially was, wow, there's this taste of this concentrated state. And I could see as

00:00:20 I work on it, it deepens and I'm able to maintain it in more and more complex situations. And

00:00:27 I'd always liked working on things. I'd always liked developing things, skills, stuff like

00:00:33 that. So it's like, this is cool. I can develop this. It is intrinsically fulfilling. It makes

00:00:42 uncomfortable experiences less problematic. And it's known all over the world. It's like

00:00:49 really cool. I'm linked to people from very different cultures, from very different belief

00:00:56 systems, but they shared this practice. They had a word for it. I'm doing the same thing

00:01:03 they did. And that was sort of cool to feel connected in that sense to a worldwide phenomenon.

00:01:12 Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi has been able to actually demonstrate with credible research this intrinsic

00:01:19 reward that goes with tasting high concentration. And he coined a word for it. There's good

00:01:29 news and there's bad news. The good news is it's a great word. That means the intrinsic

00:01:35 reward that goes with high concentration. So that's the good news. The bad news is unfortunately

00:01:42 it's the same word that I use for a different phenomenon. So that could cause some confusion

00:01:50 for people working within my system. Mihaly wrote a book with the title. So what was the,

00:01:58 what's the, what does he call it? Flow. Flow. Yeah. And if you talk about a flow state among

00:02:05 people that are interested in consciousness or this kind of thing, they'll know that that

00:02:12 refers to that. Now in my system it refers to working with change and energy and that

00:02:19 kind of thing. Now they're of course not entirely unrelated because as you get more and more

00:02:25 focused there's more and more of a tendency to be aware of how things change and the underlying

00:02:33 energies and forces. But conceptually in basic mindfulness and in positive psychology flow

00:02:40 refer to things that are distinct but it's the same word that's used in English. There

00:02:46 is another term that's commonly used in the athletic world for states of high concentration.

00:02:53 And do you know what that term is? Zone. Be in the zone and so forth. So there are colloquial

00:02:59 words for this in ordinary English. Because it's such an important phenomenon both in

00:03:06 terms of sensory issues of being more fulfilled, suffering less, and in terms of objective

00:03:17 performance abilities. It's an important notion. So I think it's useful to create a definition

00:03:24 of concentration power. My definition of concentration power or just concentration for short is the

00:03:37 ability to attend to what you consider to be relevant at a given time. So notice what

00:03:48 I said, the ability to attend to what you consider to be relevant. So you decide what's

00:03:52 relevant at a given time. And what's relevant for you might not be relevant for some other

00:03:59 person. Also at one time something is relevant, at another time some other thing is relevant.

00:04:07 Often in the definition of concentration there is a mention of restricting the attention,

00:04:14 narrowing the attention. That's not in my definition of concentration. Certainly it's

00:04:21 true that there are contractive flavors of concentration. If you place your attention

00:04:27 on the breath going in and out of your nostrils or the sensation of your abdomen rising and

00:04:33 falling, those are very small touch sensations. And if you hold your attention there, you

00:04:43 have now deemed that small sensation to be what's relevant. Your attention wanders, you

00:04:49 bring it back, wanders, you bring it back. So yes, that is a contractive flavor of concentration.

00:04:56 And there's a place for that. However, let's say that you were to intentionally create

00:05:04 a positive image, at the very same time intentionally create some internal talk that matched that

00:05:11 image, and talk that you repeated like a mantra over and over again, and at the same time

00:05:21 were to generate positive emotional feeling related to that image and that talk, and you

00:05:27 were to spread your awareness over all three of these sensory phenomena simultaneously

00:05:33 and hold that. That would be a very expansive flavor of concentration. You'd be filling

00:05:40 your entire subjective space with awareness. But that would develop the same flavor, the

00:05:48 same taste as you would get by focusing in a very small part of your experience. So my

00:05:57 teacher Sasaki Roshi says, everybody thinks that samadhi means narrowing the focus, but

00:06:04 you have to understand there are two flavors of samadhi, contractive samadhi and expansive

00:06:13 samadhi. If you're driving the car, what's by and large relevant is the touch-sight sound.

00:06:21 Touch meaning the physical linkage with the car, sights meaning the sights of the road,

00:06:25 sounds meaning the sounds of the road. What's largely relevant in driving the car is touch-sight

00:06:31 sound, which is actually a fairly broad focus. Once you understand this, you can drive in

00:06:42 rush hour traffic for two hours, arrive at your destination, and you'll be in the same

00:06:49 state of deep repose as if you had your awareness focused on the tip of your nose for two hours

00:07:07 in formal seated meditation practice without the attention wavering. It would be no less

00:07:14 of a deep experience, even though it was a very large and complex piece of a sensory

00:07:24 event. Another misconception is that in order to develop concentration, you're always going

00:07:33 to be fighting with yourself because other things come up and you have to sort of push

00:07:40 them away or push them down in order to hold on to the thing that you're concentrating

00:07:47 on. I spent many, many years wrongly practicing concentration. Without realizing it, I was

00:07:57 subtly trying to suppress things. I would decide what I wanted to focus on in my early

00:08:03 period of practice. That was typically the breath. I would be focusing on the breath

00:08:09 and then when other things would come up, without realizing it, I was subtly tensing

00:08:16 around them. I was subtly trying to push them out of awareness. I was subtly trying to push

00:08:22 them down. I had this subliminal agenda that was aversive to anything that was a distraction.

00:08:29 That creates tension and that dissipates energy and that hurts. It's uncomfortable. What we

00:08:42 want is that the concentration practice be a positive feedback loop. The more focused

00:08:47 you are, the better you feel. If you have these subtle tendencies, or maybe not so subtle

00:08:54 tendencies, to be fighting with the things that aren't inside your focus or in some way

00:09:02 by tensing around them, pushing them down, not wanting them to be there, that makes it

00:09:07 an uncomfortable experience to focus. You're literally fighting with yourself. You have

00:09:13 to be careful and train yourself to focus on what you deem relevant without rejecting

00:09:20 all the other stuff.