

3 Things Shinzen got from Joshu Sasaki Roshi

00:00:00 I've heard you speak of enlightened masters, and you spoke of Roshi as being a master's

00:00:13 master when you met him.

00:00:15 And I've heard you tell stories of other teachers that you've lived with in your encounters.

00:00:22 I've never heard you, when you've talked about your influences, of what's influenced your

00:00:27 teaching, I've heard you talk about an Uba Kin lineage or a Mahasi Sayadaw lineage in

00:00:33 terms of what they brought in noting or body sensation.

00:00:36 But the only teacher I've heard you really speak of, and you shift totally when you talk

00:00:43 about him, is Roshi.

00:00:45 Meaning Sasaki Roshi.

00:00:47 Roshi is a general title in Japanese for any Zen master is called a Roshi.

00:00:54 But yes, Joshu Sasaki Roshi.

00:00:57 And if there are other enlightened masters that might come into this conversation, we'll

00:01:04 weave that too.

00:01:05 But my interest here would be to have you talk about what it's like to be in his presence

00:01:13 and work with him, and what having this man's, I don't know, energy input into your life,

00:01:22 what that is for you as a teacher, because I don't know who else you go to for your support.

00:01:31 When I came back to the United States, I realized I still needed a teacher, but I didn't have

00:01:41 anybody that I could go to within the tradition that I wanted to work in, which is the mindfulness

00:01:48 tradition.

00:01:49 And when I came back here for a few years, I was drawn to mindfulness because it could

00:01:55 be extracted from the cultural milieu and the religious matrix of Buddhism and presented

00:02:03 as a fully secular practice.

00:02:05 And so that appealed to me, and I liked the systematic nature of

mindfulness.

00:02:10 But by the time that had happened, I was probably the senior mindfulness teacher in my part

00:02:19 of the world, but I needed somebody vastly senior to myself to kick my ass.

00:02:29 And the only place I could find it was in the Zen tradition, which is not the tradition

00:02:34 I really wanted to work in, although I was familiar with it because I had lived in Japan

00:02:41 and so forth.

00:02:43 And Sasaki Roshi was certainly the senior Zen master in the United States at that time,

00:02:50 and he's now arguably the senior living Buddhist master in the world at 102, having started

00:03:00 his monastic practice at the age of 13, do the math.

00:03:05 How long has this guy been practicing?

00:03:08 I had to study with someone, so it wasn't really in the tradition I was drawn to.

00:03:13 Do all teachers think I need someone to kick me in the ass?

00:03:19 No, some people.

00:03:21 A lot do, but some people go off on a... that's one of the ways that the wheels sort of come

00:03:29 off if a teacher doesn't put themselves under some other teacher.

00:03:34 They get a certain degree of experience and then they're sort of off, but now they don't

00:03:40 have feedback loops and their students won't give them feedback because they're in awe

00:03:45 of them and problems can develop.

00:03:47 So I wanted to make sure I'd seen...

00:03:49 That's very healthy of you to have said I need somebody to...

00:03:53 I think it's just a safety, it's like a safety net, you know, even though at that time I

00:03:59 had practiced for a long time, I still wanted someone else.

00:04:04 I've gotten three things from him.

00:04:06 One is I learned not to suppress my sense of self.

00:04:13 In my initial years of practice, I thought, oh, the Buddha says enlightenment is no self.

00:04:18 If I have any sense of self, then I'm not making progress.

00:04:23 And suddenly I was suppressing self-referential body sensations, mental images, and internal

00:04:29 talk, the stuff that's self-referential, that gives you the sense of self moment by moment.

00:04:35 I was suppressing that.

00:04:36 I was trying to get rid of that.

00:04:38 And Sasaki Roshi is a very balanced teacher.

00:04:42 So he teaches that yes, there's no self, and then there's full self.

00:04:48 And those are both no self experiences.

00:04:53 Self is nothing whatsoever.

00:04:56 As T.S. Eliot said, the still point between two waves of the sea.

00:05:01 And then there is the wave, which is the personality arising not as a thing, but as a doing.

00:05:11 And I've been suppressing the doing of self.

00:05:15 And so he disabused me of that imbalance in my practice.

00:05:20 That was the first thing that happened.

00:05:21 By his example, or did he say?

00:05:22 No, by his direct teachings.

00:05:23 Okay.

00:05:24 By all, he constantly emphasized that we're always cycling between experiences of zero

00:05:31 self and the re-arising of the feeling, thinking self.

00:05:36 And then it goes back to zero.

00:05:37 And this is a natural process.

00:05:39 Everybody participates in it.

00:05:41 Enlightened people realize they're participating in it.

00:05:45 And really enlightened people participate in it wholeheartedly without preference, one

00:05:51 side versus the other.

00:05:53 So I got, he disabused me of my notion of preferring no self to fullness of, to unfixated

00:06:02 self.

00:06:03 Okay.

00:06:04 Then he gave me the paradigm of impermanence in terms of expansion and contraction, which

00:06:10 represents a vast generalization of the early Buddhist concept of anicca or impermanence.

00:06:19 And it's a far more flexible and encompassing model and puts a whole positive spin on what

00:06:26 in early Buddhism was sort of looked at as part of suffering and had a negative spin.

00:06:32 So I got that expansion contraction paradigm, which very nicely maps onto mathematics and

00:06:37 physics and it's just a very, very useful way of guiding people into the experience

00:06:42 of impermanence.

00:06:43 I got that from him.

00:06:45 The other thing I got from him was sort of the direct vibe of when, because when you're

00:06:50 with him, he's space expanding and contracting and that tends to reach out and sort of pull

00:06:56 you into his world.

00:06:59 But then you have to go back to the meditation hall and you have to internalize that zap

00:07:04 of energy.

00:07:05 See, some people, they get Shaktipat, they get a zap of energy from a teacher, but then

00:07:10 what do they do immediately after that?

00:07:13 Well, they sing bhajans to the teacher and they talk about how great the teacher is and

00:07:18 et cetera, et cetera.

00:07:20 So it becomes a whole devotional thing.

00:07:22 And then they're just a leaky capacitor that loses that Shakti and then they need another

00:07:27 recharging.

00:07:28 Okay.

00:07:29 What I like about Zen is they never talk about it, but when you go in for the Zen interview,

00:07:35 you get a zap of the flow of nothingness from that teacher.

00:07:40 But then what do you do?

00:07:41 You sit around and then sing the praises of that teacher and get into a whole cult?

00:07:48 No, they send you back to the meditation hall where it's cold in the winter or there's bugs

00:07:54 biting you in the summer.

00:07:58 You're sleepy, you're getting beat up, you're getting yelled at.

00:08:03 All of this shit is happening.

00:08:05 How can you apply that flow that you got from the teacher to this situation?

00:08:13 Meaning can you internalize it and truly make it yours so you become like that teacher,

00:08:18 not a devotee of that teacher?

00:08:21 That's the difference between the guru zap in one tradition and in the Zen tradition.

00:08:29 And I got that from him within that context.

00:08:32 So those three things, disabusing me of my subtle tendency to suppress the self, giving

00:08:39 me this incredibly powerful paradigm that maps nicely onto science with regards to impermanence

00:08:46 as the fundamental insight, and then a sort of direct transfer of that flow

of impermanence

00:08:55 from him, but within the context of making me strong and independent of him because I

00:09:02 would immediately have to go and actually apply and internalize it and make it my own.