

Insight, Clarity & the Sensory System ~ Shinzen Young

00:00:00 What are the themes of mindfulness?

00:00:05 One of the themes that I have people explore in mindfulness is working with ordinary sensory activity.

00:00:15 That would be touch, sight, sound, feel, image, talk.

00:00:21 These categories naturally organize themselves into certain subsystems.

00:00:28 I mentioned in another segment that feel, image, talk is both a reactive and a proactive system.

00:00:39 By reactive, I mean when you hear a sound or you're aware of a sight or something physically impacts your body,

00:00:51 it may or may not trigger a mental comment, it may or may not trigger a mental picture,

00:00:58 it may or may not trigger an emotional sensation in your body.

00:01:05 If it triggers one, two, or all three of those, then I say that there has been a fit reaction,

00:01:12 a feel, image, or talk reaction to the it of the touch, sight, or sound.

00:01:20 It turns out that you can monitor how your sense of subjective self, the sense of being a perceiver,

00:01:30 you can monitor how that sense of self arises through different levels of activation of feel, image, talk.

00:01:39 In the most extreme case, when feel, image, and talk, all three activate very strongly in response to an external stimulus of some sort,

00:01:51 you will typically get a very strong sense of an eye that is perceiving an it over there.

00:02:01 However, as you're monitoring feel, image, talk, it could happen spontaneously every once in a while that there is a touch or a sight or a sound

00:02:11 and it doesn't produce any reaction in this system whatsoever.

00:02:15 When that happens, you have little or no sense of a perceiving self inside of you.

00:02:23 If you monitor those fluctuations, repeat this kind of experiment over and over again, you can get an aha experience

00:02:33 or an insight experience into the mechanism whereby the sense of I am-ness, at least in the sense of a perceiving self, arises.

00:02:45 You can have an intense reaction of feel, image, talk, but if there's a lot of clarity so that you keep those components untangled,

00:02:57 and if there's a lot of equanimity, which means that those components are completely unblocked,

00:03:03 there's no suppressing of their arising, but there's no inappropriate holding on to them once they have arisen, that's equanimity.

00:03:13 If there's enough clarity and equanimity, even though you would have a huge fit storm,

00:03:19 a huge storm of emotionality in the body, visual mental associations and judgmental chatter in your head, that doesn't turn into a self.

00:03:33 It only turns into a self when there's unconsciousness and coagulation or fixation of the feel, image, talk reactions.

00:03:46 That's what I meant when I said that these categories can bring insights, as you're observing.

00:03:52 Now, not only is feel, image, talk a reactive system, it's also a proactive system.

00:04:01 When it's not reacting to touch, sight, sound or some combination thereof,

00:04:07 it usually goes off and begins to spin memory, plan, fantasy, problem-solving, worrying, confusion, etc., etc.

00:04:18 Neuroscientists now know about this and call it the default attentional system.

00:04:26 It's being studied, but I call it proactive fit.

00:04:31 Proactive in the sense that it's not reacting to the environment, it's just going off and spinning past, future and fantasy, basically, plus problem-solving.

00:04:42 And then every once in a while, as I mentioned, the fit system is not reactive, it's not proactive, it just spontaneously goes inactive.

00:04:52 Then there's just peace, blank, quiet.

00:04:57 The body is emotionally peaceful, mental screen is blank, the head is quiet.

00:05:02 If you happen to notice the moment that that occurs, which may be very fleeting, you will get what we call insight into no-self.

00:05:12 Now, of course, there are some other natural systems here.

00:05:16 We can take touch-feel to be your body experience, the ordinary side of your body experience.

00:05:26 Then there's also a restful system in your body, which is physical relaxation and emotional peace.

00:05:32 Emotional peace is defined as a tangible awareness that your emotional centers are not active.

00:05:41 They're in a restful state, they're idling, so to speak.

00:05:46 So this gives a system of ordinary experience in the body and restful experience in the body.

00:05:53 Then your mental experience is here, your visual thoughts and your auditory thoughts.

00:05:59 So this is the ordinary side, image, talk, activity.

00:06:03 However, there's a restful system in your mind, which is blank, quiet.

00:06:10 The sense of an outer world of sights and sounds, well, that's here.

00:06:19 The corresponding restful states are silence and the defocusing of your eyes,

the soft focus, with your eyes open, which I call light.

00:06:31 One of the themes that I have people work with is different systems of ordinary experience.

00:06:38 For example, they could focus in and just work with feel, image, talk,
00:06:43 or they could focus out and just work with touch, sight, sound, or other combinations.

00:06:50 I call that theme focus on ordinary.

00:06:54 Then by way of contrast, you can work with various restful systems, including the whole thing at once.

00:07:01 You could just let your attention freely float among whatever restful states were available, physical relaxation, emotional peace in the body, mental blank, soft focus of your eyes.

00:07:15 And if there happened to be quiet or silence around you, you'd have an auditory component to the rest.

00:07:23 The restful states are what most people who don't meditate think meditation is.

00:07:32 Certainly, releasing stress and recharging your battery through enjoying restful experiences is an important component in the meditative endeavor.

00:07:46 That's why I give people these various restful systems to work on, and I call that the theme of exploring rest.

00:07:53 However, within the mindfulness tradition, taking ordinary experience and making it extraordinary by working with it using high concentration, sensory clarity, and equanimity,

00:08:08 that's also an important way of practicing.

00:08:13 It's good because if you want to focus on rest but you can't, there'll be a reason.

00:08:20 The reason is there's too much activity. Well, then you can focus on the activity.

00:08:24 On the other hand, sometimes people run into this situation where when they practice, not much is coming up.

00:08:31 In that case, how do you keep the edge of clarity and therefore the edge of growth?

00:08:41 Well, I say when nothing much is happening as you're sitting there, six things are happening.

00:08:48 Your body is physically relaxed. Your body is emotionally peaceful.

00:08:53 Your mental screen is blank. Your head is quiet. Your eyes are defocused, and your ears are defocused.

00:09:01 So you're having six restful experiences all at once.

00:09:05 By being aware of that, that brings a clarity component into the experience of rest,

00:09:12 and that clarity component guarantees that there'll be growth in your practice,

00:09:18 that you won't get stuck in a good place of just mellowing out year after year without gaining insight and purification.