

Depth & Breadth of Concentration - Part 1 of 3 ~ Shinzen Young

00:00:00 I take concentration power to be one of the three core skills that constitutes mindful
00:00:14 awareness.
00:00:16 Probably my very first discovery that sold me on the meditative endeavor is I started
00:00:24 at the end of an hour of meditation of focus on breath, I started to notice that I would
00:00:32 go into these states of, it was a light concentration, but for me it was a highly altered state since
00:00:39 like most people I had lived my life in a very scattered way.
00:00:44 I started to notice that at the end of a period of breath counting, which is what they gave
00:00:50 me in the Zen temple, that I would drop into these concentrated states and my teacher told
00:00:56 me well that's good, that's called zammai, zammai is the Japanese pronunciation of samadhi,
00:01:03 that's good, but you now need to try to maintain that in all aspects of life as you go about
00:01:11 daily life.
00:01:12 I said how to do it and he said well you start with simple things, the temple tasks that
00:01:17 you have to do, the washing the floor, the washing dishes, raking the sand, those are
00:01:22 pretty simple things, just focus on that and then it will extend out to more and more complicated
00:01:30 life activities.
00:01:31 And in fact I found it was true.
00:01:34 Over the years that eventually became over the decades, it has developed in two directions,
00:01:43 it's gotten deeper, deeper, deeper and it's gotten broader, broader, broader, meaning
00:01:48 able to maintain it in more and more complex life situations.
00:01:55 And as I said I noticed it was intrinsically rewarding.
00:01:58 There was just something, it didn't matter what I was focusing on, if I had a high concentration
00:02:03 that in and of itself was a reward, it was, maybe I shouldn't use the word, but it was
00:02:10 a high.
00:02:11 That sort of sold me on this, it's like how cool is this, I could just do this, I'll never
00:02:16 waste any time again in my life.
00:02:18 If I'm just sitting around waiting in a doctor's office or something like that, I won't have
00:02:25 to waste my time waiting for a plane, I'll just like, you know, get into this concentrated
00:02:32 state.
00:02:33 See all my life I was afraid of being bored, I hated being bored and I discovered that
00:02:40 there wasn't any more boredom.
00:02:41 Because if you take something that's intrinsically boring and focus on it in a very, in Samadhi,
00:02:49 if you can taste the Samadhi, if you can taste the concentration as you're focusing on this
00:02:56 boring thing, it's not boring anymore, it's intrinsically rewarding.
00:03:02 So that's pretty cool.
00:03:04 And then I was able to appreciate why in monasteries east and west they give you such boring tasks
00:03:11 to do.

00:03:12 The archetypal task for Catholic nuns would be stamping out communion wafers, okay?

00:03:21 A whole lifetime of just making communion wafers.

00:03:24 I would suggest to you that's either heaven or hell, depending on how, to use their term,

00:03:30 how recollected you can become as you do that task.

00:03:34 If you become highly focused on that task, it's more and more and more intrinsically

00:03:40 interesting.

00:03:42 I also discovered that not only does the highly focused state carry an intrinsic reward, but

00:03:52 it also reduces suffering.

00:03:57 When they finally took me into the temple, they said that they would, this was in Japan,

00:04:04 they would let me come into the temple, but they wouldn't teach me any of the Shingon

00:04:09 practices, the secret Vajrayana practices.

00:04:14 But I could stick around and work in the temple, and they gave me these simple tasks to do,

00:04:18 and I was like bored to death until somebody pointed out to me, well, that same state that

00:04:23 you get into when you do the breath meditation, you can get into that state when you do these

00:04:29 boring tasks.

00:04:30 So that was like great.

00:04:31 So I did these boring tasks for about a year and started to discover they weren't, as I

00:04:37 said, I could be intrinsically fulfilled doing these very simple things.

00:04:43 Then they finally said, okay, well, you seem to be serious about this, you've been sticking

00:04:48 around and you memorized the whole liturgy on your own, which as a foreigner is pretty

00:04:54 impressive, you're able to memorize these long texts in Sino-Japanese, and you've kept

00:05:00 your nose clean, so okay, we're going to initiate you into these secret practices, but you're

00:05:08 going to have to do it the old-fashioned way.

00:05:11 At this temple, we do it the old-fashioned way.

00:05:14 So I found out what the old-fashioned way meant.

00:05:20 So it's 100 days in isolation in winter with essentially very little source of heat.

00:05:29 I mean a few charcoal briquettes while you're in your room, but you're mostly not in your

00:05:34 room.

00:05:35 You're in the main hall of the temple where there's no source of heat, and it's a blizzard

00:05:41 outside and you're doing these tantric rituals three times a day, but before each one, you

00:05:50 have to go to this frozen cistern, break the ice, fill this bucket full of ice water, take

00:05:56 all your clothes off and like douse yourself with this freezing water, and then dry yourself

00:06:02 with a towel that's about six inches square in size that freezes in your hands as you're

00:06:11 attempting to dry yourself.

00:06:12 You're actually like knocking the ice out of this thing.

00:06:16 So it's like three rituals a day with this mizu gori.

00:06:21 Okay, mizu gori in Japanese.

00:06:23 Mizu means cold water.

00:06:25 There's two words for water.

00:06:26 There's not a single word for water in Japanese.

00:06:30 If it's hot water, it's called yu.

00:06:32 If it's cold water, it's called mizu.

00:06:35 So and gori means to purify, to take away the impurities.

00:06:42 So this cold water purification.

00:06:44 You're going to have to do three cold water purifications every day for 100 days.

00:06:52 So it's like day number three.

00:06:59 And something I had noticed was that if I kept in a focused state while I did this thing,

00:07:07 it was bad, but it wasn't unbearably bad.

00:07:11 It was just like that.

00:07:14 But if my attention was wandering, it was unbearably bad.

00:07:18 And it's like day number three and I have this epiphany.

00:07:24 There's 97 more days here.

00:07:29 And I see in front of me not a fork, but a trichotomy.

00:07:35 There's exactly three things are going to happen.

00:07:40 Either I'm going to give up because I can't handle this and return to the United States

00:07:52 in deep disgrace, or I'm going to suffer for the next 97 days abjectly, or I'm going to

00:08:10 stay in a state of samadhi for the next 97 days to the best of my ability.

00:08:17 And I didn't want to give up in deep disgrace, and I sure didn't want to suffer abjectly

00:08:28 for 97 days.

00:08:30 So I decided, okay, at least I know it reduces the suffering if I keep in a highly focused

00:08:36 state.

00:08:37 So I'm just going to do my damndest not to suffer.

00:08:42 Not to suffer in the sense of, well, I'm going to have to go through this thing, but try

00:08:48 to keep as focused as I can.

00:08:50 So you might say that that was a giant biofeedback device.

00:08:56 Negative biofeedback device.

00:08:58 Go out of samadhi, you're miserable.

00:09:01 Go back into samadhi, well, it's at least bearable.