

How Shinzen Became Involved in Native American Spirituality

00:00:00 You do Native American ceremonies. I'd be interested in how you got into that and also

00:00:16 how that fits into the Buddhist, the ritual ceremony, how these two practices are compatible

00:00:25 for you. Sure. The way it started was, gee, I'm thinking maybe at least 25, maybe 30 years

00:00:38 ago, I was running retreats in the Tucson area at a ranch that was owned by a man named

00:00:46 Doug Boyd. Doug Boyd's father is very famous. His name is Elmer Green, and he's one of the

00:00:53 pioneers in brainwave biofeedback, actually. Doug had this ranch that he let us use to

00:01:03 run our mindfulness retreats. The first time we did a retreat out there, he came to me

00:01:12 at the beginning of the retreat and he said, I grew up in Asia, and I've always wanted

00:01:21 to bring good representatives of Asian spirituality together with good representatives of the

00:01:30 Native spirituality of this area, the American Indians from this area, the Arizona area.

00:01:40 He tells me he's got a friend named Rupert Encinas, who he describes as a pipe holder,

00:01:49 a sweat lodge leader, and a sun dancer. I had no idea what any of those things implied,

00:01:58 but the way he said it, it sounded like it was important and a big deal. Then he says,

00:02:05 and if you want, at the end of the retreat, he will run a sweat lodge ceremony for your

00:02:12 group. I asked him to describe the sweat lodge ceremony, and he did, and it sounded like,

00:02:20 oh, that could be interesting. That's what happened. When the retreat was over, we told

00:02:26 people, anybody that's interested, you can stay on. One of the local Native American

00:02:32 spiritual leaders named Rupert Encinas is going to take us through a traditional ceremony

00:02:41 called the sweat lodge. A bunch of people did elect to stay, so we did this. I remember
00:02:52 vividly what that experience was. It impacted at all levels. I was just amazed. I was amazed
00:03:01 at how subtle and multi-leveled this thing was. On the surface, it was sort of like just
00:03:11 a physical thing. Hey, we're in a sauna here. We're kind of like sweating for maybe even
00:03:15 health purposes. It sort of had a surface level of maybe a physical cleansing paradigm.
00:03:23 Then at a deeper level, it's a religious ceremony. You're praying and so forth. It's also a group
00:03:32 psychotherapy where people are burying their souls. Men are crying. The boundaries and
00:03:41 the inhibitions break down. You're sort of all together in this small hot area. It's
00:03:47 dark. Women are wearing just cotton dresses. Men are in bathing trunks. Very intimate,
00:03:54 very close. There are these intense physical sensations from the heat and whatever. It's
00:03:59 opening people up. It's a group psychotherapy. Whatever anybody says, everybody supports
00:04:05 them. They say, that's good. Wazhtelo, that's good. Hechiduktelo, it's like, yeah, so be
00:04:18 it. It's like this huge supportive environment where people are just letting all this psychological
00:04:24 material out. It's like a group process, a group therapy, group psychotherapy. At another
00:04:31 level, it's a shamanic journey because the intensity of the heat and whatever, you're
00:04:36 starting to go into the power realms and see spirits and the rocks and so forth. At another
00:04:42 level, it matches the Buddhist paradigm of purification equals intensity multiplied by
00:04:50 equanimity. You're in this ceremonial context. Within that context, everything has become
00:04:59 very simple. It's very formulaic. There's nothing to do but just open up, be focused
00:05:07 and be equanimous with the heat and whatever emotions may be coming up. The basic Buddhist
00:05:13 paradigm is intensity plus equanimity equals flavor of purification. Sure enough, Native

00:05:22 people call this a purification ceremony. I could see how it worked at that level. Then,
00:05:32 at a symbolic level, it was the whole idea of expansion and contraction, interplay of
00:05:41 Father Sky and Mother Earth. The pipe has the long stem but it has the earth bowl. You
00:05:48 could see every single thing that they did had that fundamental sense of a simultaneity
00:05:54 of affirmation, negation, expansion, contraction. In other words, it incorporated all of these
00:06:02 levels simultaneously into one ceremony. I remember when it was intense and I'm crawling
00:06:14 out and half passed out. The first thought that went through my mind is, and this was
00:06:22 a facetious thought, it had a facetious tone. The thought was, oh, this is what they mean
00:06:30 by primitive religion. The primitive was in quotes because, of course, it was the antithesis
00:06:40 of primitive. It was so multilayered and so subtle and so integrated. I guess when the
00:06:50 Europeans came here, they saw that the material culture was primitive. A stone axe is not
00:06:58 as good as a steel axe. They just assumed that the people were primitive in all ways
00:07:06 and that their religion was primitive. It was amazing that they were able to do all
00:07:14 these things at once woven into this integrated experience. I got out of there and I just
00:07:22 knew this is for me. That's how I got involved. If I were to say the relationship between
00:07:31 the Native American path and the Buddhist path, I would say that it's a complementarity.
00:07:39 They both move you in the direction of concentration and equanimity. The Buddhist one is sort of
00:07:51 like it's very systematic. That's good. It's sort of a very personal experience.
00:07:59 It's sort of not all that flamboyant or fun. You're just sitting there dealing with stuff.
00:08:07 Whereas the Native ceremonies are shared. There's a social context. It's fun. You're
00:08:13 singing and you're talking and you're, oh, me talk for y'all singing. You can just

00:08:18 let it all hang out. You get to learn another language. You're singing and you're drumming

00:08:24 and it's sort of flashy and interesting. I would say for me, the Buddhist practice is

00:08:32 the substance that will always be the cake. I like to have some frosting and that's

00:08:38 the Native American ceremonies.