

SHAKTIPAT or ENERGY TRANSMISSION in BUDDHISM

~ Shinzen Young

00:00:00 So, I had some interesting questions that people gave me.

00:00:14 So one was, is there anything like Shaktipat in Buddhism?

00:00:21 So how many people know what the word Shaktipat means?

00:00:28 Just curious.

00:00:29 Not as many as I would have thought.

00:00:33 Well, Shakti is a Sanskrit word meaning energy, and pat means to fall or confer.

00:00:48 So Shaktipat is a sort of zap of energy that you get from a teacher, often within a Hindu

00:00:56 context, but I think it could be generalized from that.

00:01:04 Usually done in some sort of ritualized way.

00:01:10 The most famous example would be students come and the teacher touches them with a peacock

00:01:18 feather or something like this, puts their hand on them, looks at them, does something

00:01:24 to cause Shakti to arise within that person.

00:01:30 So the question is, is there Shaktipat in Buddhism?

00:01:34 And that actually can be answered in a whole bunch of different ways.

00:01:42 First of all, Shakti is related to Kundalini Shakti.

00:01:49 So where does that fit in Buddhism?

00:01:53 Where does this energy, which is sometimes expressed in terms of heat, sometimes expressed

00:02:04 in terms of a movement of the spine and so forth, where does this notion fit in terms

00:02:13 of Buddhist practice?

00:02:16 Well, the simple explanation is, it's an aspect of what I call flow.

00:02:27 And what I call flow is just my way of talking about impermanence.

00:02:32 So there's two ways that people can relate to impermanence.

00:02:40 One is, well, it's what happens when you bring a lot of concentration, clarity and equanimity

00:02:46 to ordinary sensory experiences.

00:02:50 Then they present themselves in a wave paradigm as opposed to a particle paradigm.

00:02:57 So there is no special energy separate from any ordinary experience.

00:03:05 In other words, the so-called materiality of the world, the carnality of one's body,

00:03:15 the somethingness of one's mind, all of these just turn out to be what happens when you

00:03:26 don't have a complete experience of seeing, hearing and feeling.

00:03:31 And when you have a complete experience, which is just another way to say, have a very clear,

00:03:37 concentrated and equanimous experience, when you have a mindful experience, in other words,

00:03:45 beyond a certain critical value of mindfulness, those ordinary experiences become extraordinary.

00:03:55 They show you their wave nature as opposed to their particle somethingness nature.

00:04:02 So there's no energy separate from what is ordinary.

00:04:07 Or a metaphor that might be taken from Einstein is he said that matter is just frozen energy.

00:04:17 So ordinary sensory experience, inner and outer seeing, inner and outer hearing, inner

00:04:23 and outer body, that's just flow, that's just energy that has been coagulated by what?

00:04:36 Well, it's been coagulated by incomplete experiencing of it.

00:04:43 The other way to relate to the energy thing is that there's this energy and then there

00:04:48 is, in contrast to that, the material world.

00:04:54 And then the goal is to somehow get beyond the material world and to get to this energy

00:05:01 which is desirable.

00:05:04 And that leads to a rather different paradigm, which is that, well, there are ways of manipulating

00:05:14 this energy and causing this energy to be transferred and enhancing it and so forth.

00:05:21 So certain traditions like Kundalini Yoga, Qi Gong, Nei Gong in China and so forth, they

00:05:31 sort of work from a perspective of, well, there's this thing called Shakti, there's

00:05:37 this thing called Qi, it's this energy thing and we cultivate it, we manipulate it, we

00:05:44 work with it and make it stronger and stronger and we can actually use it for doing stuff.

00:05:51 That's one paradigm.

00:05:52 And I think that's a legitimate paradigm.

00:05:56 There's nothing wrong with that.

00:05:58 Then there is the paradigm that I would use, which is that there's sensory experience and

00:06:06 Qi equals MC squared.

00:06:08 So by fully experiencing the materiality of things, the non-materiality becomes evident.

00:06:22 Now there's nothing to say that a person couldn't work within both of these paradigms.

00:06:29 I was once at a conference of Western teachers with the Dalai Lama and someone asked about

00:06:35 mixing practices because a lot of Western Buddhists and a lot of Western Buddhist teachers

00:06:44 have more than one lineage that has influenced them.

00:06:49 So the question was put to His Holiness the Dalai Lama and he said, well, it's okay, but

00:06:55 you just, when you do one practice, you do that practice and in the afternoon if you

00:06:59 do some other practice, then you do that practice.

00:07:04 So as long as you can understand the complementarity of them and use each system as its own system,

00:07:14 then that's okay.

00:07:16 So there's nothing to say that you couldn't do Kundalini yoga or Qigong, which involves

00:07:22 manipulating the quote energy, and also do Vipassana, where you're simply paying attention

00:07:30 to what is and if flow becomes evident, you have the option to pay attention to it.

00:07:36 And yes, indeed, the more you pay attention to it, the more prominent it becomes.

00:07:41 That does tend to create a feedback loop in that way.

00:07:47 So Shakti, so now we know the Shakti part, what that means.

00:07:54 So is there transference of energy from a teacher to a student in Buddhism?

00:08:05 And the fact is, in Tibetan Buddhism, yeah, big time.

00:08:10 And it's formalized as initiations and there are whole ceremonies built around it and so

00:08:19 forth.

00:08:20 So yes, there certainly is that structure within certain parts of the Buddhist world.

00:08:29 But what I like more is the way Shakti part is done in the Zen tradition, at least in

00:08:37 Rinzai Zen.

00:08:38 I'm not that familiar with Soto Zen.

00:08:41 Soto Zen is a little different.

00:08:44 In Soto Zen, the Roshi sits with you, and in Soto Zen, you face the wall, but the Roshi
00:09:00 faces out and sees everyone.

00:09:04 So that means everyone that's fidgeting or doing whatever, it's eyes open practice, right?

00:09:11 Now I guess in some sense, maybe this is a little bit of a Buddhist guilt trip.

00:09:15 It's like, maybe you're not going to fidget so much because you know you're impacting
00:09:22 on the Roshi's see out.

00:09:26 But you get uncomfortable enough and lost in your own misery, pretty soon, I don't think
00:09:32 that guilt trip really helps very much.

00:09:38 People do move and fidget and whatever.

00:09:40 And so the gift of the Soto Zen Roshi's is that they just take in all of that and metabolize
00:09:49 it as part of their sitting.

00:09:53 But it's done in the Zen Do because that, but the cool thing is you've actually got
00:09:58 not just a Roshi, but maybe a bunch of Roshi's sitting with you in the Zen Do.

00:10:04 In Rinzaï Zen, as far as I've ever experienced it, the Roshi doesn't go to the Zen Do.

00:10:10 You go to the Roshi, but you have one on one interactions in which you are given koans,
00:10:18 which you've all heard about and I've talked about.

00:10:23 So that one on one interaction with the Roshi is in fact Shaktipat, but it's never talked
00:10:33 about that way.

00:10:36 You either catch on or you don't.

00:10:41 So in the interaction while you're on the surface seemingly working on this koan, at
00:10:52 the depths that master is grabbing your belly button.

00:10:58 And how do they do that?

00:11:00 Well, some of you may remember the teachings of Don Juan by Carlos Castaneda.

00:11:11 So it's about this anthropologist from UCLA that goes to Arizona and starts to work with
00:11:18 this Yati Indian and loses all objectivity and gets sucked into that culture's way of
00:11:32 experiencing things.

00:11:33 And this is true.

00:11:34 It actually happened.

00:11:35 It's like a really interesting and cool story.

00:11:41 So in the first book, at one point, this anthropologist, Carlos, asks Don Juan, which is the fictitious
00:11:52 name of the Yati shaman that he worked with, whenever I'm around you, all this weird shit
00:12:01 happens.

00:12:04 What is it?

00:12:08 And he said, you're just seeing the power of my not doing.

00:12:16 Now when I read that, I understood.

00:12:20 I don't think the anthropologist understood.

00:12:23 Not at that time.

00:12:24 It was just another mysterious, weird thing that this guy said.

00:12:30 You're just seeing the power of my not doing.

00:12:33 Those Roshis, they don't do anything to grab your belly button.

00:12:39 In fact, it's the opposite.

00:12:43 It's their emptiness that's grabbing you.

00:12:47 Their pure doingness.

00:12:49 The fact that they are a flow, whether they're laughing or whether they're bawling you out,

00:12:57 it's just wind of nature.

00:13:05 You pick up on their body language, you pick up on all of those things, and that is indeed

00:13:12 Shakti.

00:13:13 See, that's sort of the difference between Vipassana and Zen.

00:13:17 There's a lot of differences.

00:13:18 I mean, obviously they come from different cultures, historically, etc.

00:13:24 But practice-wise, a gross oversimplification would be that in Vipassana you observe sensory

00:13:40 experience until you realize its impermanent nature.

00:13:50 Maybe that's as far as you go, or maybe if you're lucky, you go beyond that to not only

00:13:58 experience the senses as flow, but to actually ride on the flow, meaning that the bounciness

00:14:07 of the void starts to speak through you and move your arms and so forth.

00:14:16 You might say that that's impermanence affecting the motor output in addition to the sensory

00:14:24 input.

00:14:26 So in Vipassana you work with the sensory input, and some Vipassana teachers it affects

00:14:33 their motor output and they have that bouncy, liberated quality that you get in Zen.

00:14:40 But other Vipassana teachers it doesn't affect the motor output and they're more inert, I

00:14:46 guess would be the way to put it.

00:14:49 Whereas in Zen, this is like, once again, don't get me wrong, this is a gross oversimplification,

00:14:57 but in Zen they first train you to, they train your motor circuits into how to flow with

00:15:03 impermanence.

00:15:04 It's the Zen schedule.

00:15:05 And it's the whole energy of the interaction that you have with the Roshi, who's like moving

00:15:11 in certain ways and then you find yourself moving in those ways.

00:15:14 So you're sort of training your output to flow with expansion and contraction, and then

00:15:20 hopefully at some point it will go beyond your motor circuits and start to infect your

00:15:29 perceptions of self and world so that your senses begin to flow with expansion and contraction

00:15:35 and you get liberation.

00:15:37 So it's almost like they do the same task but in opposite order to a certain extent.

00:15:49 So that for me is a kind of Shaktipat because the Roshi is conveying the activity of emptiness,

00:15:58 the Buddha nature, the activity of impermanence to you.

00:16:04 And it's not talked about but if you know how to pick up on it, then you carry that

00:16:14 with you back into the Zen dome.

00:16:18 So the difference with this kind of Shaktipat versus the Hindu formalized ceremonies or

00:16:25 the Tibetan formalized ceremonies, the difference is first of all it's not talked about that

00:16:31 way.

00:16:32 You either pick up on it or you don't.

00:16:35 And there's no formalized ceremony, ostensibly it's just you interacting with this weird

00:16:40 person and doing these weird things.

00:16:52 So I like that because there's not all this, I don't know, specialness about it or what

00:17:02 have you.

00:17:05 But what I really like about it and once again what represents a very significant difference
00:17:15 from say the normal Shaktipat thing that you get from some Baba, okay.
00:17:22 I'm not dissing it, I'm just trying to describe the situation.
00:17:30 Normally what's going to happen, you get your Shaktipat from the Baba and then what happens
00:17:34 after that?
00:17:35 Well you all eat prasad, you sit around, you chant bhajans and everybody feels great and
00:17:41 you all talk about how great the Guru is and then you leave and when you need your next
00:17:51 fix you come for your next fix.
00:17:55 However in the Zen formal Shaktipat you go in, you have this incredible experience with
00:17:59 the Roshi and then what?
00:18:03 Then you go back to the Zen and if it's in the winter it's not heated and it is freaking
00:18:08 cold.
00:18:09 If it's in the summer there's no fan and there's mosquitoes and it's hot and you just want
00:18:16 to sleep but they'll beat you and yell at you and essentially you're going back to the
00:18:22 samurai torture chamber.
00:18:26 And there you get to test to what extent you have truly metabolized the Shakti.
00:18:35 And you now apply it to the samurai torture chamber.
00:18:42 So that the goal here is to create equals, not disciples.
00:18:51 Every Guru worth his mala should want equals, not disciples.
00:18:58 For real, not lip service, for real.
00:19:02 In fact as I implied yesterday every Guru worth his mala or her mala should want students
00:19:11 that are better than them.
00:19:14 End of story.
00:19:16 So that form of Shaktipat you got to use it.
00:19:20 You got to use it for something real, aching legs, sleepy head, emotions running up the
00:19:27 yin yang because you're being abused all day and it's pushing every button that can be
00:19:34 pushed.
00:19:35 Okay, now how real is that Shakti?
00:19:38 Can you experience that as flow?
00:19:42 And that's how that Roshi got to be the way they are and so it goes.
00:19:48 So yes, there's that kind of Shaktipat in Buddhism.
00:19:55 And then there's the daily Shaktipat that we all have now, don't we?
00:20:02 Because we're always sharing energy with each other.
00:20:06 Everyone.
00:20:07 To the extent that a person has a practice to that extent the people around them pick
00:20:13 up on that.
00:20:18 And so you're all giving Shaktipat to other people whether you're aware of it or not.
00:20:23 It may not be as powerful because number one, people don't necessarily have the expectation
00:20:30 and the expectation is of course a big part of it.
00:20:35 And number two, well your Shakti might not be quite as intense as someone that's meditated
00:20:43 80 years in a monastic training but you got something, okay.
00:20:49 And you're also getting Shaktipat from other people.

00:20:54 And in fact, this is going to sound a little weird but you get it from animals who very
00:21:00 much are in the flow and you get it from your children until they develop a talking self.
00:21:11 In the first few years of life, what does infant, infant in English, infance from the
00:21:18 Latin infance, which is the present participle of fari which means to speak.
00:21:27 Same root as confabulate and so forth.
00:21:30 So the infant is the one that doesn't speak yet.
00:21:34 Has not acquired external language, has not presumably acquired internal language but
00:21:40 there's a certain magic period there where the, when you're attending to a neonate and
00:21:49 so forth or I don't know how far the magic extends on average but you know probably,
00:21:59 you know the first year at least, where basically your infant, your child is a Roshi.
00:22:10 They are just space expanding and contracting.
00:22:15 And if that's then parenting, every time you take care of a baby, I think nature intends
00:22:22 that to be a sunset, a Shaktipat for the parent to recharge their batteries which are strained
00:22:34 to the max by the parenting endeavor.
00:22:39 So that's, you know, there's that.
00:22:44 Yeah it's interesting about the no self, the not doing, this is a really weird story.
00:22:54 Okay, they tell me that I'm supposed to tell stories.
00:22:59 So that's supposed to make a good Dharma talk.
00:23:05 This is a true story.
00:23:08 So many years ago I was driving through Santa Monica with a student of mine who has since
00:23:19 passed away.
00:23:20 I don't know if any of you remember about Martinez but anyway, this is way back there.
00:23:28 So we were driving in Santa Monica and we had this weird psychic experience.
00:23:40 It was like a truly psychic experience.
00:23:44 So we're driving down the street and we both started to look at this homeless person who
00:23:52 was, they were just on the street corner and it was evident that there was some mental
00:24:04 illness there.
00:24:07 But they were just sort of like, you know, just sort of like moving, okay.
00:24:18 And we looked at this guy and we looked at each other and we knew that we had had exactly
00:24:23 the same thought and it was true.
00:24:28 And the thought was if you clean this guy up, put white robes, put him in front of a
00:24:36 group of people and don't let him say anything, people would have Shaktipat.
00:24:44 And that's a fairly complicated thought.
00:24:55 Because there was just no self there.
00:24:58 He was just part of nature.
00:25:03 Now apropos of stories, years later I was at another student's house and so I see this
00:25:31 book and it's one of these like photo books, you know, that people would put on like a
00:25:39 coffee table or whatever this was on, her piano.
00:25:45 And I'm hesitating now because I'm trying to remember the exact title of the book, unfortunately.
00:25:53 I don't plan these talks very much, so.
00:26:01 Okay anyway, it's a picture book.
00:26:04 It's just pictures.

00:26:05 It's like this huge book of photographs.

00:26:10 And I start to look through these photographs and what's interesting is that there's nothing

00:26:17 by the photographer, the person that's the author of the book.

00:26:22 There's nothing at all.

00:26:23 But what there is is an intro, a preamble by Toni Morrison.

00:26:29 Now that's a fairly important person in the world of art and literature and so forth.

00:26:36 So that tells you, well this is somehow a significant book.

00:26:43 But there's nothing by the person who actually took the photos.

00:26:48 This is anything about anything at all.

00:26:50 In other words, the photos have to speak for themselves.

00:26:53 This is big book, okay.

00:26:56 And I'm flipping through this book and I'm like freaking out because it's very evident

00:27:06 to me, these are all portraits by the way.

00:27:10 It's very evident to me what this book is about and that I had never seen a book like

00:27:21 this ever.

00:27:26 And so this is, I think some of you know Markel.

00:27:33 This is at Markel's house.

00:27:36 So anyway, I go to Markel and I say, but this book is amazing.

00:27:41 And she said, well, you know Bergman, the guy that wrote it or that photographed, I

00:27:46 guess we lost our power.

00:27:49 The photographer is a distant relative of mine.

00:27:58 So I say, well, can you get his telephone number?

00:28:04 He said, sure, I got his telephone number.

00:28:08 So we called him up and he was there.

00:28:14 And I said, I told him what I thought his book was about.

00:28:20 And he freaked out.

00:28:24 And he said that I was the only person who ever understood what the book was about.

00:28:32 Of all the people that, you want to check this out?

00:28:37 Of all the people that had seen it in exhibitions or whatever.

00:28:42 So now I'm sure you're quite curious as to what it's about.

00:28:46 Now, damn it, I don't want to get the title wrong.

00:28:51 Let me just see if I can find it.

00:29:02 You're surfing the web.

00:29:03 Yeah.

00:29:04 This is a good day and time.

00:29:07 Let's just try here.

00:29:10 I was going to do something else with the internet than this.

00:29:17 I'm very klutzy and slow.

00:29:26 I don't think that's going to work.

00:29:41 You got it working?

00:29:42 Okay.

00:29:43 Let's see if we find it.

00:29:44 Okay, I found it.

00:29:45 That's just amazing.

00:29:58 Here it is.

00:29:59 And that gave them time to get this fixed.

00:30:12 Untangle and be free.

00:30:18 People don't like the divide and conquer, so I gave them a more politically correct

00:30:26 way to say it.

00:30:32 So it is by Robert Bergman.

00:30:39 The name of the book is A Kind of Rapture.

00:30:44 So what it is, is he went through the rust belt of the United States, the old decaying

00:30:56 cities, photographing street people who for whatever reason, usually a combination of

00:31:11 a hard life and physical and mental illness, had been thrust into a no self state.

00:31:22 In other words, people for whom the blows of life had driven them to a no self, a rapturous

00:31:37 no self experience.

00:31:39 He went around the country looking for those kinds of people, catching them at the moment

00:31:47 where they manifested the non-ego that their hard life had taken them to.

00:31:56 And you get picture after picture after picture so that the message, you know, you see one

00:32:03 or two pictures like that, it doesn't have the same impact.

00:32:08 But if you see 50 pictures like that, then it hits you what the whole thing is about.

00:32:18 So the reason I thought it was so extraordinary is that although there's a lot of books about

00:32:29 enlightenment or no self coming about through practice, and there are a number of books

00:32:35 of people, written by people that have had spontaneous enlightenment experiences, what

00:32:44 no one's looked at is this whole thing, this whole other aspect.

00:32:50 And so it's, in terms of its subject matter, it's very unusual.

00:32:57 And then in terms of the, so the message is very unusual and the medium is unusual.

00:33:02 Instead of writing a book talking about this phenomenon, he shows it to you.

00:33:09 And you either get it or you don't.

00:33:12 So anyway, that's a whole other little riff, but apropos of where you might go for your

00:33:20 Shakti Paschal.