

MINDFULNESS with SICKNESS ~ Shinzen Young

00:00:00 So, I'm aware that some people are dealing with the challenge of being sick and so forth.
00:00:17 Well, it's interesting, in a Zen temple, being sick, they have all this special vocabulary
00:00:26 for everything. Ordinary things all have their own sort of like special things. So, they
00:00:34 don't say byouki, which means the normal Japanese word for being sick. They have this expression
00:00:41 byousou, which means the symptoms of illness or the appearance of illness. So, instead
00:00:58 of saying this monk is sick, they say this monk is showing the form of sickness, like
00:01:09 the appearance of sickness, byousou, meaning of course there's a little bit of an implication
00:01:18 that there is a sensory experience of being sick. And then that is a form, a manifestation.
00:01:30 The implication of course being that eventually you want to be able to escape into the sensory
00:01:40 event of being sick, the byousou. And the Japanese, there's another word in Japanese
00:01:50 that there's just no English equivalent, which is narikiru. Narikiru means you deal with
00:02:01 it by totally becoming it. You so become it that everything else is cut off. Naru means
00:02:12 you become. Kiru means you cut. So, you so become it that everything else is cut off.
00:02:20 You utterly achieve oneness with it. Or a more idiomatic expression in English might
00:02:31 be complete commitment. There's a complete commitment to just experiencing being sick.
00:02:41 Now the good thing is, the lucky thing for us, is if you are sick, I'm going to encourage
00:02:51 you as much as you want to sleep and rest and take breaks and so forth. But in the Zen
00:03:05 temple you're not allowed to do that, no matter what. You have to follow the schedule no matter
00:03:12 how sick you are. And that is really misery. I didn't get sick much, but every once in
00:03:22 a while. We got inoculated against Japan encephalitis because you get bit by mosquitoes, right?
00:03:34 And oh man, I had a reaction to the shot. But it's like there's no mercy. You just have
00:03:47 to keep doing the schedule, right? No matter how you feel. I'm remembering now. I'd forgotten.
00:03:57 That was very unpleasant. It was summer too. It was like hot. Of course, a lot better than
00:04:07 getting Japan encephalitis. But anyway. So yeah, there's actually a long tradition of
00:04:20 using the sickness for your practice. But here, you know, you have the luxury that you
00:04:26 can take it easy if you need to. But even when you're taking it easy, try to make you
00:04:33 not begrudge the fact that, oh, I got sick now, I can't have a retreat. That is the retreat.
00:04:43 And in daily life, injury, illness, visiting the hospital. Whenever I work with students
00:04:49 that they're calling me from the hospital, I'm having this operation or that thing going
00:04:53 on, I say, I always have a stock phrase. I say, okay, you're having a non-consensual
00:05:00 retreat. You're being forced into a situation where there's nothing to do but explore the
00:05:08 prospect of happiness independent of conditions. Because this condition is going to go on for
00:05:13 a little while. Before there was Chan, or as the Japanese call it, Zen, in China, there
00:05:25 was Tantai. That was the first meditating school of Chinese Buddhism. And that was actually
00:05:34 at a relatively early period before the Tang, during the Sui dynasty is when that started.
00:05:43 And then it gained momentum in the early Tang. They came up with a very interesting way to
00:05:56 meditate. The lineage did not survive, though, the lineage of practice, although the texts

00:06:04 have survived. Other lineages like Chan or Zen and Pure Land and so forth survived in
00:06:16 China, but Tantai didn't, although it has been preserved in Japan. It's called Tendai
00:06:25 in Japanese. The reason I'm mentioning it is that the first meditation manual that I'm
00:06:33 aware of in the Chinese language was written by the Tantai Dasher, the master who created
00:06:48 the Tantai system. It's in 10 chapters and it's called the Moha Jurguan, which means
00:06:58 ... Moha is actually a Sanskrit word incorporated into Chinese. It's Maha, which means big,
00:07:08 right? Or great. Jur means in Mandarin means to stop. And Guan means to see or observe.
00:07:18 So the great stop and see. So stop, it translates Shamata. And see or Guan translates Vipashana.
00:07:33 So before there was the word Zuochan in Mandarin, which is Zazen in Japanese, that's the normal
00:07:41 word in Chinese and Japanese for meditate. But before that word existed in East Asia,
00:07:49 the word for meditate was Jurguan, which means to do Shamata Vipashana, to do calming, concentrating,
00:08:01 but also observing insight mixed together. In any event, before I practiced meditation,
00:08:15 I was an academic studying it, a scholar of it. And I was fortunate because before I even
00:08:25 got interested in Buddhism, I was literate in both Chinese and Japanese. I could read
00:08:32 those Asian languages fluently. So all my early study of Buddhism was done actually
00:08:41 by reading books in Chinese and Japanese about Buddhism. And one of the books that I read
00:08:49 was this manual by Tiantai. It's something that was written in the 7th century AD in
00:08:59 China. So it's like over a millennium ago and half a world away. But you could sort
00:09:13 of have an intimacy with the person that wrote this by reading what they had to say and reading
00:09:20 about their struggles. The reason I'm mentioning this is 10 chapters, and just like I attempt
00:09:28 to do, he very systematically lays out the nuts and bolts of practice and relates it
00:09:36 to various scriptures, particularly the Lotus Sutra was central to this particular school.
00:09:50 So one of those chapters, it's an entire chapter devoted to just the whys and wherefores of
00:10:04 practicing when you're sick. It was a long time ago that I read it. I don't remember
00:10:14 the details, but I remember thinking, oh, Tiantai must have himself had a lot of health
00:10:25 challenges and it must have been very difficult for him to achieve what he achieved. And that's
00:10:34 probably what's motivating. This is probably based on his own experience. So it's like
00:10:41 a whole section, it's like a tenth of the book. The first meditation manual in East
00:10:48 Asia is about not begrudging the fact that you're sick. But okay, you do this, you do
00:10:57 this, you do this, you do this, here's how you can treat illnesses. I seem to remember
00:11:03 now there was some Chinese medicine in there. I also seem to remember that there was some
00:11:08 Taoist magic in there to sort of make certain kinds of spirits cause certain kinds of illnesses
00:11:16 and you can militate against them with this or that. I seem to remember that, but mostly
00:11:21 what I remember is the notion, okay, you're going to get sick. That's just an opportunity
00:11:34 for practice and don't begrudge the fact and just don't lose a beat. Use it for your practice.
00:11:42 So you know how you can do that within the context of what we're doing, you apply a technique.
00:11:49 Basically if you have a sensory challenge, there are two fundamental strategies and you
00:11:58 can, there's plan A, plan B and you can alternate plan A and plan B. Plan A is turn towards
00:12:06 it, untangle, unblock, not acute, totally become it. How do you go beyond hot or cold?
00:12:16 When it's hot, you boil to death. When it's cold, you freeze to death. You just become
00:12:21 it. So that's plan A. I call that strategy turn towards. Now when you take a turn towards
00:12:34 strategy, you need concentration, clarity and equanimity to do that successfully. The

00:12:43 flip side of that is by attempting to focus on it in a systematic way, you will develop
00:12:54 concentration, clarity and equanimity. So it's an exercise in those skills. So you are
00:13:01 developing those skills, but now you're also applying those skills to deconstructing or
00:13:08 having a complete experience of whatever the sensory challenge is. Plan B is turn away.
00:13:21 So turn away would be in terms of possible focus range. Well, you could, let's say that
00:13:33 the challenge is the physical discomfort of an illness. So what is the sensory gestalt
00:13:44 for physical discomfort? We talked about it in the group process this morning. There's
00:13:49 the uncomfortable physical sensation and then there's the reactivity of the inner system
00:13:56 to that. The uncomfortable physical sensation will often resolve into one or more local
00:14:05 intensities and then a more subtle global spread. Subtle is significant. So you've got
00:14:18 local intensity, global spread in feel out, the physicality of the body, and then you
00:14:25 have the inner system, mental image, mental talk and body emotion reacting possibly to
00:14:33 that or being impacted by that. So that's five sensory elements, local physical discomfort,
00:14:46 global physical discomfort, mental image, mental talk and body emotion. So you can work
00:14:53 with the parts, you can work with the whole, untangle, unblock. That would be to focus
00:15:02 a turn towards strategy. What's a turn away strategy? Well, anything that's not that.
00:15:08 So you could anchor insights and sounds. Sometimes when I work with people who have severe chronic
00:15:17 pain, acute chronic pain, the only thing they can do is they just have to get away from
00:15:24 the mind and the body because the mind and body are just untenable. The only thing they
00:15:30 can focus on is sights and sounds. So anchor out or maybe you can access restful states.
00:15:41 See rest, hear rest, feel rest, or maybe you can nurture positive image, talk, body, emotion.
00:15:50 So an alternative strategy, plan B, is turn away. Now there's a tendency to think that
00:16:03 if I turn away that's denial and suppression. Unfortunately there's also a tendency to think
00:16:10 if I turn towards that's just going to make it worse and reinforce it. I think you can
00:16:16 see that if you buy into those two beliefs you literally have no place to turn. You've
00:16:22 set yourself up for abject suffering. So what I would like to encourage people is to consider
00:16:29 that in fact both of those options are viable strategies. Why? Because the turn away also
00:16:39 entails concentration, clarity, and equanimity. Your ability to do it depends on those skills.
00:16:48 On the other hand, the attempt to do it builds those skills. So you're developing and applying
00:16:54 the same skill set. Concentration power, let's say you're anchoring in sight and sound because
00:17:00 the mind and body are untenable. So you get pulled away from sights and sounds so you
00:17:06 keep coming back. That's concentration power. Sensory clarity, well the sights and sounds
00:17:11 might be subtle relative to the intensities that are going on in mind-body space. Well
00:17:18 that ability to detect subtle things, that's a sensory clarity. Or specifically when you're
00:17:25 working on restful states, see rest, hear rest, feel rest, typically the restful states
00:17:30 are quite subtle relative to the activations. But you're developing sensory clarity by the
00:17:37 ability to detect. Remember sensory clarity has two, depending on how you want to look
00:17:45 at it, three sub-dimensions. Resolution power, the ability to distinguish. Sensitivity, the
00:17:57 ability to detect subtle signals. Those are different things. They both come under clarity.
00:18:03 If you want to make it more complicated but also more traditional, you can say there's
00:18:08 another aspect to clarity, what the Seyedahs call penetration. So, okay, one aspect of
00:18:18 clarity is detection. So the ability to detect subtle things may be involved, probably will

00:18:26 be involved in a turn away strategy. And how about equanimity? Well, your willingness to
00:18:32 allow the sensory challenge to expand and contract in the background while your attention
00:18:38 is focused in the foreground on something else, that's background equanimity. So, like
00:18:43 I say, I like to divide the skills not only into dimensions but sub-dimensions. So the
00:18:52 ability to open up and turn towards, that's one kind of equanimity, foreground equanimity.
00:19:01 The ability to turn away but at the same time open up in the background, that's actually
00:19:09 a related but independent skill that I call background equanimity. And I encourage people
00:19:14 to develop both of those equanimity skills. Now we've talked about concentration, the
00:19:20 ability to hold something small, but also the ability to hold something large, the ability
00:19:27 to hold one thing for a long period of time, or the ability to taste momentary concentration
00:19:32 on a variety of things. These are dimensions within the clarity skill. So I'm going to
00:19:40 say that if you elect a turn away strategy, that you are developing and applying the core
00:19:49 skill set. If you elect a turn towards strategy, you're doing exactly the same. So if you think
00:19:56 about it this way, it's a win-win situation. Either strategy is legitimate. And what you
00:20:04 want to avoid is the lose-lose situation, which is, I don't want to turn away from it
00:20:09 because that's just denial and suppression. I don't want to turn towards it because that's
00:20:15 going to just exacerbate it and reinforce it. So now you have nowhere to turn. So anyway,
00:20:23 if you happen to have a sensory challenge of any sort in general, and specifically if
00:20:36 you're struggling with an illness at a retreat or that kind of thing, these are some things
00:20:42 you can keep in mind. And so when you're in the meditation hall, try to be aware of your
00:20:51 breathing that may come about through sleepiness or through some discomfort that you're going
00:20:58 through. Open your eyes, straighten your spine, etc., etc. Most of you know this story, but
00:21:08 this is how I learned about that a lot of times you don't realize how disruptive you
00:21:17 might be. So I'd been meditating for, I don't know, maybe a year or so, and I went off to
00:21:26 this Soto Zen temple called Antaichi. And so this is one of these Soto Zen, so you meditate
00:21:33 facing the wall. I was already a Shingon monk at the time, so that means that I was wearing
00:21:41 robes. And underneath, so you have sort of these robes, but they're not very thick. And
00:21:53 then underneath that you have a kimono. And it's a winter kimono, but kimono is not really
00:22:00 designed for cold weather. Okay, it's great for the summer, the air just comes through,
00:22:05 you know. But I was really, really cold. And I was sick. I got sick in the middle of the
00:22:16 thing. And I was really, really miserable. And, you know, no heat in the zendo at all,
00:22:26 right? And it's like winter. So I guess I didn't realize it, but I was like...all day.
00:22:46 So like, the second day of the session, you're facing the wall, right? You can't see anything
00:22:53 behind you. And I go to sit down and bang, someone punches me in the nose from the back
00:23:03 with a Kleenex stuck to my nose. And I couldn't see who it was. I guess the only word that
00:23:23 I can think of is Vesuvius of Rage. All day long. It just over and over again. How dare
00:23:41 that motherfucker. I didn't know who the motherfucker was. It was someone, almost certainly a Japanese
00:23:59 monk. So now I've got all that going on. And you can't do anything. You just have to face
00:24:12 the wall and face yourself. I mean, I got the message, okay, you know, dude, you've
00:24:20 been an asshole. You've been sniffing this whole time. So now I, okay, I won't sniff
00:24:26 anymore. But oh my God, I was so angry and so uncomfortable. And there's just nothing
00:24:35 you could do. It's Soto Zen, it's 50 minute sits, 10 minute walk, 50 minute sit, 10 minute

00:24:43 walk. I think they did 14 hours of sitting each day, something like that. And you're
00:24:52 facing the wall. No talks, no nothing. It was hardcore. It was shikantaza. It was like
00:25:00 just sit. And there's nothing to do but just face that inner hell and deal with it. Which
00:25:12 is sort of awful, but not nearly as awful as not dealing with it. Some of you have sweated
00:25:21 with my friends Wolf and Lisa, the traditional Native American sweat lodge. So anyway, it's
00:25:30 Lisa that does the really hot sweats. She's full blood Lakota Sioux. I don't know if that
00:25:36 has anything to do with it. And we were in a sweat once and she was saying, I know this
00:25:45 path is hard. I know this path is hard. I know this path is hard, but there's one thing
00:25:51 harder than this path. Harder than doing this path is not doing this path. And it is so
00:25:59 true. So, you know, I could have been the person that wasn't miserable and sick and
00:26:10 beat up in Japan. I could have been not that person. That would have been so much harder.
00:26:18 So much harder. I think I mentioned in the last retreat, maybe I didn't, but an acquaintance
00:26:28 of mine wrote a book called 10% Happier, Dan Harris. He's on the nightline, right? And
00:26:42 I think ABC, Good Morning America or something like that, right? He's like a talk hoe, but
00:26:46 he's one of us. He famously had a panic attack on camera at some point in his career, which
00:26:57 you can actually see it's on YouTube. It's like, we'll be there forever, right? And that
00:27:05 was his wake up call that he had to, something was radically wrong with his life. And a major
00:27:13 part of his recovery was to take on this practice, mindfulness practice. But because he's in
00:27:21 the position of being a prominent television personality, it's sort of cool for us. So
00:27:30 he wrote this book called 10% Happier. And he's got a whole program that goes with it.
00:27:38 Actually he's partnering up with one of my facilitators, Jeff Warren from Canada. They're
00:27:44 on tour now in the US, sort of bringing the message of mindfulness. It's so cool that
00:27:52 we're that mainstream at this point. Anyway, the title of that book got me thinking about
00:28:01 my own life. So, you know, 10% Happier. And I started to calculate in my mind, did like
00:28:09 a thought experiment. Okay, at my current age, what would the picture be if I hadn't
00:28:21 made that decision at the age of 25 to, by hook or crook, meditate every day of my life?
00:28:30 What if I hadn't done that? What if I'd just been one of the million other things
00:28:40 that I could have been as a non-meditator? So where would I be, given who I was at 25?
00:28:51 Extrapolating, where would I be? And then where I know myself to be as the result of
00:28:59 that decision. And objectively, I just, I had to say, it's not 10% happier, it's
00:29:11 10 times happier. I mean, objectively, easily 10 times happier. Or put the other way, I
00:29:20 would be one-tenth as happy, which actually would be like pretty miserable. So anyway,
00:29:29 I encourage you in that regard.