

Equanimity and the Taste of Purification - Part 1 of 2 ~ Shinzen Young

00:00:00 Now, another thing that you find all over the world, and which also goes back to our
00:00:13 shamanic tribal ancestors, is the notion that you can purify consciousness by exposing yourself
00:00:27 to harsh ordeals.
00:00:30 And that practice is called asceticism.
00:00:37 We have the remnants of Western asceticism embedded in the English language, in certain
00:00:45 idioms that we use.
00:00:48 For example, to wear a hair shirt or to flagellate yourself, you've all heard these expressions.
00:00:57 Well these are actual practices that were, and actually are, still done within the Christian
00:01:05 contemplative tradition.
00:01:07 That's called asceticism, ascetical practices.
00:01:11 The idea being that by exposing yourself to this discomfort, that in some way this will
00:01:19 purify away your sinfulness or reduce your original sin, and therefore get you closer
00:01:27 to God.
00:01:30 Similar practices exist in tribal cultures.
00:01:36 And yes, there's a notion that they can be purification.
00:01:44 I suspect that the notion that these are purifications came about secondarily.
00:01:51 Can't know for sure, but my conjecture would be that our ancestors originally exposed themselves
00:02:01 to these physical ordeals primarily in order to enter the realms of power, where they would
00:02:11 encounter spirits, where they would attain healing powers, they would have visions.
00:02:19 You can take workshops in shamanism, and it's like you drum or you do these different things,
00:02:26 and it's like two weekends and you did a seminar in shamanism, and that's sort of like, now
00:02:35 I know what shamanism's about.
00:02:37 When you do shamanism in traditional cultures, it usually involves hair-raising physical
00:02:44 ordeals that most of you know about because we have a connection with the native community
00:02:53 here.
00:02:55 You have to put yourself through things that you wouldn't think any human, I mean like
00:03:00 throwing a little cold water over your body is a joke compared to a sun dance.
00:03:10 It was probably the case that people exposed themselves to these ordeals in order to enter
00:03:19 altered states, enter the spirit realms, and then I'm guessing they discovered that as
00:03:26 they were doing this, they were changing as a person.
00:03:31 Something about them was getting better.
00:03:34 So a paradigm of asceticism evolved where it's like, okay, it's not just that exposing
00:03:43 ourselves to these harsh sensations thrusts us into the spirit realm, but it also purifies
00:03:51 our consciousness.
00:03:53 All around the world you can find ascetical practices.
00:03:57 If you read the standard histories of Buddhism, they will usually say that the Buddha rejected

00:04:07 asceticism.

00:04:09 However, I wouldn't exactly say that.

00:04:14 I would say rather that the Buddha refined asceticism, conceptually and practically.

00:04:25 Conceptually, in essence he replaced the notion of the more it hurts, the more it purifies,

00:04:37 with the notion of the more you bring equanimity to an experience, the more purification occurs.

00:04:46 If it's an unpleasant experience, that will purify consciousness in one way.

00:04:53 If it's a pleasant experience and you bring equanimity to it, that will purify consciousness

00:04:58 in another way, a related way, but from a slightly different angle.

00:05:04 But if it's a neutral experience and you bring equanimity to it, that also purifies consciousness,

00:05:10 even though it's a non-valenced experience.

00:05:14 So what is equanimity?

00:05:17 We can think of it as training our sense gates not to fight with themselves.

00:05:26 So if, for example, just to give a specific example, if a sensation wants to arise, at

00:05:36 some point the body may fight with its own sensation, but you can gradually train the

00:05:43 body not to fight with its own sensations as they arise.

00:05:50 If a sensation is about to pass, the body may hold on inappropriately long, but you

00:05:58 can train the body not to hold on inappropriately long to the sensations it produces.

00:06:06 And the same is true for the other sensory modalities.

00:06:13 It's easiest to see in the body, but the same principles hold in visual experiences, image,

00:06:20 sight, and in auditory experiences, sound and internal talk.

00:06:27 You can think of equanimity as training the sensory circuits to get out of their own way,

00:06:32 to not fight against their own productions, but also to not inappropriately hold on to

00:06:41 their own productions.

00:06:43 So one way, it's a little bit of an esoteric metaphor, but one way to think about equanimity

00:06:49 is that it's a training of the sensory circuits out of their usual habit, which is to be real

00:06:56 pectic.

00:06:57 As soon as they start to move, they coagulate.

00:07:02 Training out of that habit into behaving like fixotropic substances, where the more you

00:07:08 stir it, the thinner it gets, and therefore the less resistance it presents to change.

00:07:17 As we bring equanimity to an uncomfortable experience, number one, that experience doesn't

00:07:24 cause as much suffering, and number two, that experience delivers a flavor of purification,

00:07:31 so that it's possible to get something positive, a taste of purification, even inside discomfort.

00:07:41 Now what about the pleasant experiences?

00:07:43 The more you bring equanimity to a pleasant experience, the more that experience produces

00:07:52 a quality called fulfillment, which is not the same as mere pleasure.

00:07:58 Unpleasant is what we really want, pleasure is what we think we want.

00:08:03 So as you bring equanimity to a pleasant experience, it delivers more fulfillment, and also it

00:08:12 delivers the same flavor of purification.

00:08:16 So you can get the sense that you are purifying consciousness by bringing equanimity to pleasant

00:08:23 or unpleasant.