

SHAMANISM ~ Shinzen Young

00:00:00 Well, there's a lot to say about shamanism, so I'll try to sort of limit it. First of
00:00:15 all, I actually talk about this in my book, The Science of Enlightenment, the notion that
00:00:24 you can look upon consciousness as sort of like a three-layered parfait, and you have
00:00:31 surface ordinary objectified experience that might be called conventional reality. Then
00:00:37 you have the absolute rest and the formless doing that is at the very quote center, if
00:00:45 we wanted to use that metaphor. It's not perfectly good, but if you imagine it's a sphere and
00:00:51 there's the surface, and then there's what's in the center, which is the dharmakaya, it's
00:00:58 formless. Then there's all these intermediate realms. And if we think of the spiritual path
00:01:08 as a journey from surface to source, some people are going to traverse those intermediate
00:01:14 realms without any unusual phenomena at all. They're just going to go right down. Some
00:01:23 people are going to encounter the pool of poison and pain and trauma and such big time,
00:01:37 which is sort of the Freudian subconscious. Some people are going to encounter the Jungian
00:01:43 subconscious, God's, ghosts, ancestors, healing abilities, etc. etc. The spirit world, basically
00:01:55 what native people would refer to as a spirit world. Some people encounter both the Jungian
00:02:01 and the Freudian version of the subconscious. As I say, some people encounter neither. They
00:02:08 just go right down.

00:02:16 There can be a couple extremes with regards to this map of the journey. One is not uncommon.
00:02:25 So you're on the surface and the journey is not turning 180 degrees away from the world.
00:02:32 It's actually turning orthogonal. It's turning 90 degrees into an independent dimension,
00:02:39 which is the dimension of depth as opposed to surface. So now you're going down. Of course,
00:02:46 each level has its own surface. One extreme is you go down a little bit and you encounter
00:02:54 either the Freudian subconscious or the Jungian subconscious. If it's the Freudian, you just
00:03:06 don't want to go there. If it's the pleasant side of the Jungian, well, that's one thing.
00:03:12 But if it's sort of weird and scary archetypal material, you don't want to go there. So you
00:03:20 flail your way back to the surface like a drowning person gasping for air. I'm never
00:03:25 going to go down there again because that's just too weird. That's one extreme.

00:03:31 Another extreme, which is the extreme I recommend, is you just keep going down no matter what.
00:03:43 Keep a plumb line, a direct vector towards the source. It's not just me. The Christian
00:03:53 tradition says the same thing, although they think of it as going up rather than down.

00:04:01 But it doesn't matter. The direction of the coordinates, the grid, doesn't make any difference
00:04:08 at all. St. John of the Cross drew this picture of this mountain, Mount Carmel, which actually
00:04:17 exists in the Holy Land. It's near the city of Haifa in northern Israel. Cho and I visited
00:04:24 there. It's pretty cool. It's the origin of the Carmelite order, which was one of the
00:04:29 main meditating orders back in the day. Anyway, he drew Mount Carmel and he talked about subida
00:04:39 del monte Carmelo, the ascent of Mount Carmel. In this metaphor, God or the source is not
00:04:49 at the source. It's actually at the pinnacle, but it's exactly the same thing. On it he
00:05:00 writes nada, nada, nada, y en monte nada. This is how you're going to get there. Nothing,

00:05:10 nothing, nothing. When you finally get to the peak of the mountain, nothing with a big
00:05:15 capital N. Then he shows these wild monsters and flowers and things. He says, if you want
00:05:24 to ascend Mount Carmel, you cannot allow yourself to be distracted by the flowers nor frightened
00:05:32 by the wild beasts. You have to just go straight up. Same general idea. The other extreme is,
00:05:41 no matter what sorts of bouquets or beasties you may encounter, as you go down, you just
00:05:49 keep going down. Which in terms of classical dry vipassana would just mean whatever comes
00:05:56 up you just observe, just observe, just observe. That's an extreme. Here's another extreme.
00:06:02 You go down to a certain level and you get interested in the content of that level. Usually
00:06:08 it's something that involves special powers. Without realizing it, you turn 90 degrees
00:06:16 again. The pernicious part of this is you don't know it. You think you're on a vector
00:06:23 to the source, but in fact you're now going parallel to ordinary experience out into the
00:06:30 realms of power, exploring them. You can spend a lot of time doing that. As I say, there's
00:06:36 actually nothing wrong with exploring those realms, unless you think you're still going
00:06:44 down. Then that becomes a shunt away from progress. What's in between? So between turning
00:06:59 90 degrees again, right? You're here on the surface, 90 degrees down, and then gradually
00:07:05 without realizing it, you turn 90 degrees again, right? Now you're going parallel, but
00:07:10 you don't know it. One extreme is you're only interested in the realms of power. The Lakota
00:07:20 Sioux call those people Pejuta Wiccasha, which actually literally is a medicine person or
00:07:28 a healer. Then the other extreme is what I mentioned. You don't go into those realms
00:07:37 at all, you just purify and get insight. In Lakota that is referred to as a Wiccasha Wakana,
00:07:45 a sacred person. The spectrum of classical shamanism all over the world, and this is
00:07:53 the original religion of our species everywhere. There was a time when everyone, as far as
00:08:00 I anthropologists know, everyone sort of had essentially the same religion, and it was
00:08:07 shamanism. This is the old time religion. Judaism, Christianity, Confucianism, what
00:08:15 have you, they may be old, but they're not old the way this is old. They're not 10, 20,
00:08:21 30, 40,000 years old, okay? So the spectrum of classical shamanism ranges through all
00:08:32 the oblique angles, from pure power to pure purification, but most shamans that I've ever
00:08:40 met are on an intermediate angle. They're definitely gaining no self-purification insight.
00:08:48 There's a component to that vector of going down, but there's also a component out of
00:08:54 it. And depending on the relative magnitude of your interest in power and what the spirits
00:09:04 have to say versus the egolessness and oneness and so forth. So that's why I speak of the
00:09:13 spectrum of classical shamanism. It goes all the way from... And in the power area, you
00:09:21 can actually get cultural negatives that are very intense for those cultures. You can have
00:09:34 very dysfunctional cultures. It's not just modern people that are messed up, okay? There
00:09:43 are traditional cultures that have really messed up views of the world. It's not uncommon,
00:09:55 for example, to believe that death is not natural. If someone dies, it's because someone
00:10:02 killed them and probably killed them with medicine. And by medicine, I mean magic. So
00:10:12 American Indians have an entire vocabulary. It's English, so they can talk inter-tribally,
00:10:20 but it's English you would never understand. You wouldn't know what it means to shoot medicine
00:10:25 at someone or to get engaged in a medicine war with another tribe. That's warfare in
00:10:34 the power realms, and they take that absolutely as seriously as warfare on the surface. It's
00:10:40 the same deal. Someone dies, go to the shaman, why did they die? Those guys up the river

00:10:48 shot medicine at us. And then we got to either shoot arrows at them or shoot medicine back.

00:10:55 So it's not necessarily a good thing, okay? It really depends on the culture. I mean,

00:11:03 I've had friends for whom medicine wars were a serious business. I have to say, I don't

00:11:14 share the paradigm, but I knew it was very real for them. And they were from these kinds

00:11:23 of cultures and so forth. So anyway, there's this spectrum that I call the spectrum of

00:11:30 classical shamanism. And if like, well, I guess maybe this is going into too much detail.

00:11:45 There's a lot of fear in the Navajo culture, for example, of shape shifters. So there can

00:11:52 be some real negatives around some of this stuff.

00:11:59 So let me tell you a story, a personal story about shamanism. Years and years ago, decades

00:12:13 ago, actually, I was running a retreat in Tucson. Steve knows, I'm going to talk about

00:12:22 Steve knows this medicine person. So we were running a retreat at this ranch, Doug Boy's

00:12:29 ranch. And this is nigh unto 40 years ago, I think. So a while back, maybe not that,

00:12:40 maybe 1985, I guess. And so Doug was very into Native American spirituality, but he'd

00:12:51 grown up in Korea, actually. His father was, I guess, in the military. So he knew a lot

00:12:57 about Asian culture. And he wanted the Buddhist teachers to get together with the Native American

00:13:03 teachers. So he said, there's a local Tohono O'odham. That's a tribe that anthropologists

00:13:11 used to call the Pima Papago. So there's a local Tohono O'odham Indian. His name

00:13:18 is Rupert Encinas. And if you want, he'll do a sweat lodge for you, sweat lodge ceremony.

00:13:28 So I said, well, what is it? Tell me what, you know, after the retreat, we could do this

00:13:34 sweat lodge. So it was, well, what's a sweat lodge? Describe it to me. He described it

00:13:39 and made sense. I could see how it would fit with Buddhist practice. And he said, Rupert

00:13:46 is a pipe carrier. He's a road man in the Native American church, which is the peyote

00:13:52 religion, which is the North American version of ayahuasca, basically. And he's a sun dancer.

00:13:59 I said, well, what's a sun dance? And he described that and sort of made sense to me.

00:14:06 So we had this sweat lodge. And I remember, so that was my first lodge. And so it's

00:14:16 out on the rez and there's no technology. He didn't even have electricity in his house

00:14:24 at that time. I mean, now he's got a cell phone and YouTube segments and things like

00:14:31 that. But things change, right? But back then, he didn't even have electricity.

00:14:37 But so anyway, so I remember there was this point where, you know, you open the flap.

00:14:48 And he was running it the Lakota way. There's different ways of running a sweat lodge. He

00:14:54 was doing it the Lakota way. So the Lakota or Eastern Sioux, the person that pours the

00:15:00 water sits at the door. So he opens the door. All the steam goes out. There is the pristine

00:15:07 Sonora Desert without any telephone lines or cars or anything. It looked the way it

00:15:16 looked 20,000 years ago. And the sun's coming down. And it's sort of glancing rays. He's

00:15:29 full-blood Indian, just classic. Looks like something right out of the Smithsonian Institute.

00:15:35 So his profile is long hair, you know, because you unbraid your hair in the ceremony, right?

00:15:42 So he's got the long hair. And like classic Native American features. And you could see

00:15:52 the sun was revealing a chest full of piercing scars from the sun dance. Like he'd sun danced

00:16:01 16 times at that time. And that was 35 years ago.

00:16:11 And it was like, oh my God, this is a time tunnel that we're being allowed to enter to

00:16:22 experience what our really remote ancestors experienced. And it was just amazing to me.

00:16:37 And when I got out, I remember crawling out. It was pretty hot lodge. And I remember the

00:16:48 first thought that went through my mind. Oh, this is what they call, quote, primitive religion.
00:16:58 Because shamanism used to be called primitive religion. And the reason for the air quotes
00:17:03 is it was so advanced, so subtle, so multi-leveled, so psycho-spiritually sophisticated. Weaving
00:17:16 group therapy into prayer, into the power realms, into purification through equanimity,
00:17:23 into being forced to concentrate because you just can't do anything but concentrate.
00:17:30 So it's like, oh, primitive religion. And meaning, of course, that when the Europeans
00:17:38 came here, it's true that a metal ax is a more advanced tool than a stone ax. But I
00:17:50 guess they assumed that because the physical technology was quote, primitive, that the
00:17:57 psycho-spiritual life of those people was primitive. And it was the very antithesis
00:18:04 of that. So anyway, that was my first encounter with shamanism. And I'll be seeing Rupert
00:18:13 again next month when I go to Tucson, 35, however many years later. We're still doing
00:18:19 ceremonies together.