

Sasaki Roshi & Burmo-Japanese Mindfulness Fusion ~ Shinzen Young

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00:00:30 I would say his main innovation is the reframing of the Buddhist perspective
00:00:42 called Anicca or impermanence in terms of expansion and contraction. In early
00:00:50 Buddhism they talked about a stage in one's practice where after paying very
00:01:00 close attention to sensory phenomena one's awareness becomes dominated by the
00:01:08 perception of sensory events rising and passing. The word in Pali is Udayabhaya.
00:01:17 Udaya means coming up and Vyaya means passing away. You combine them together
00:01:25 and you have the word Udayabhaya. So there comes a time in one's practice
00:01:33 where the sensory clarity is so great that you're aware of the risings and
00:01:41 passings of sensory events and that dominates your awareness. A stage after
00:01:49 that is an awareness not of sequential rising and passing but an awareness that
00:01:57 no sooner does something arise but it's already passing. This is described quite
00:02:05 clearly in the classic text on mindfulness practice called the Visuddhimagga.
00:02:11 The Visuddhimagga was written probably in the 5th or 6th century AD in Sri Lanka
00:02:18 by a man named Puttakosa. So in it he talks about this stage where no sooner
00:02:28 is there the arising but there's the passing. Now I'm sure that Sasaki Roshi
00:02:35 never read the Visuddhimagga but he's done decades and decades and decades of
00:02:43 practice. He's 102 now. He began his practice when he was 14 years old and
00:02:50 what a practice! Japanese Rinzai Zen, heavy duty samurai boot camp, monastic
00:02:57 training from the age of 14. So the good news is he really really really has deep
00:03:07 experience. The other news is it's hard to understand what he's saying because
00:03:14 it's just so profound and advanced. I sincerely doubt that he ever read the
00:03:21 Visuddhimagga but he has had all the experiences described there and has
00:03:28 formulated them though in a somewhat different way. He talks about
00:03:34 simultaneous expansion and contraction which is the same thing that
00:03:41 Puttakosa talks about when he says no sooner is something rising but it's
00:03:46 also passing away. So it's right there in the ancient literature. However if you
00:03:54 formulate it as it is done in the Pali in terms of rising and passing then
00:04:03 there is the danger that there's going to be a meditator over here observing
00:04:12 the rising and passing over there. And in fact that would be a common criticism
00:04:19 that Zen people might make of mindfulness practice. Well the expansion
00:04:25 contraction formulation solves that problem because now instead of it's
00:04:34 rising and passing at the same time you have the notion which allows for a
00:04:41 two-dimensional thing over here that I'm observing back here. Expansion and
00:04:46 contraction is three-dimensional. It's all-encompassing. When something arises
00:04:52 it arises in three dimensions and that includes the observer as part of the

00:04:59 arising. The observer is expanding into existence and contracting out
00:05:08 of existence simultaneously as opposed to a two-dimensional thing that you
00:05:12 observe. It's now a three-dimensional thing that you participate in. So I
00:05:17 would say the main innovation of Sasaki Roshi is formulating impermanence in
00:05:24 terms of expansion and contraction and the notion that if you simultaneously
00:05:31 totally give yourself to the expansion and contraction you become the expansion
00:05:37 and contraction. And then there's nothing but expansion and contraction and at
00:05:42 some point they cancel each other out into a flat line of zero which is the
00:05:51 unborn, the primordial state of the source. Then there is an abiding in zero
00:05:58 until it repolarizes. When it polarizes once again in between, literally in
00:06:06 between the forces of affirmation and negation, the forces of life and death, in
00:06:12 between are born the feel-image-talk-perceiver and the touch-sight-
00:06:19 sound-world. Both of them are born simultaneously in the cleft that
00:06:26 surrounds self and world. This gives a model for how consciousness works and it
00:06:36 allows for an experience where you participate in expansion, you
00:06:43 simultaneously expand and contract. You and your world simultaneously are born
00:06:49 in between the clefts of life and death and then life and death cancel out into
00:06:55 zero and you go back to zero and then you and your world come out of zero
00:07:02 again, born in the cleft in between expansion and contraction. And then that
00:07:08 cleft collapses back into zero and this is the cycle of impermanence which
00:07:17 Sasaki also calls the activity of the Dharma or the activity of consciousness
00:07:26 and so forth. So I would say his main innovation is this three-dimensional
00:07:33 paradigm that vastly broadens and generalizes the early Buddhist notion of
00:07:41 impermanence and actually gives, in a sense, a mathematical formulation for
00:07:47 what's going on in consciousness. As far as the main difference between his
00:07:54 teaching and mine, he has you experience this through koan practice. What I've
00:08:01 done is I've taken his model and I have mounted it within the noting practice
00:08:09 of Burmese vipassana. To me that makes it more systematic and available to a
00:08:17 larger audience. So instead of the sort of intuitive but very energetic Zen koan
00:08:25 approach, I take a more prosaic algorithmic noting technique that I got
00:08:33 from Burma and divide into a whole sequence of steps starting with
00:08:43 just focusing on ordinary experience and then breaking it up finer and finer
00:08:47 until by small manageable steps of noting certain phenomena I can bring the
00:08:55 average person to actually experiencing this very advanced paradigm of expansion
00:09:01 and contraction. So I would say that in some ways I'm very much part of the
00:09:06 modern world in that in the modern world we have cuisines and music forms that
00:09:14 are called fusion where you take two traditions and you fuse them in a way
00:09:21 that's harmonious. So what I've done is I've fused the most creative of the
00:09:27 contemporary Japanese Zen masters with a Burmese form of attentional skill
00:09:38 training and so it's a sort of Burmo-Japanese fusion that was created
00:09:50 by a Jewish science geek.