

The Reptilean Brain, Skinnerian Training & the Experience of God ~ Shinzen Young

00:00:00 There are various ways to reach the subconscious. The surface of the subconscious can be reached
00:00:18 through mental talk. A little deeper level cannot be reached by mental talk, but it can
00:00:29 be reached by mental images. The deepest level of the subconscious cannot even be reached by
00:00:37 mental images, but it can be reached by body sensations. The way mindfulness deals with the
00:00:47 subconscious is by setting up a feedback loop, which I've described in other segments,
00:00:57 whereby at the level of body sensation, when the reptilian brain, which is essentially a body brain,
00:01:09 a touch-feel brain, when the reptilian brain notices that when it interferes with the flow
00:01:21 of body sensation, its own product of course, that there is suffering, and when it stops
00:01:29 interfering, that there is the absence of suffering or fulfillment, the reptilian brain notices that,
00:01:39 and it is changed in the classical Skinnerian mode. You train the animal the way you train
00:01:48 an animal, with reward and punishment at the level of body sensation. By putting yourself
00:01:55 in an environment where not much is going on for a period of time, either the micro retreat of a
00:02:04 daily sit or the macro retreat of taking a weekend or a week or ten days or longer and going off and
00:02:15 doing nothing but meditation, within that simplified environment, the deepest mind can
00:02:22 unlearn its habit of fighting with itself. Essentially, what B.F. Skinner and the others
00:02:32 in the Behavioralist School proved was that if you want to train an animal, that animal has to
00:02:42 be given rewards and punishments, and those rewards and punishments have to be immediate
00:02:55 upon the behavior, and they have to be absolutely predictable. If they're random, then you won't
00:03:04 get strong learning, and if there's a gap between the behavior and the reinforcing stimulus, then
00:03:17 also there won't be strong learning. So in the simplified environment of a sit or a retreat,
00:03:25 a situation is set up where the animal within us, the reptilian brain, can consistently and
00:03:34 immediately be aware when it fights with itself, there is suffering, so that's the punishment. When
00:03:43 it stops fighting with itself, there is fulfillment, that's the reward. The simplified environment of
00:03:51 formal practice creates the situation where there is consistent and immediate reinforcing feedback.
00:04:03 In the classical Skinnerian mode, I know Skinner is sort of a dirty word in a sense, because the
00:04:14 behaviorist influence at a certain period in the academic world led to ridiculous notions about
00:04:27 the nature of humanity. However, they did have some good points going for them, and it turns out
00:04:37 somewhat ironically, I think, that the most subtle and powerful spiritual path that I'm aware of,
00:04:49 something that the Skinnerians would have been horrified by, which is the Buddhist experience,
00:04:59 turns out that large parts of it are best explained by Skinnerian model. But in this case,
00:05:13 the behavior is not that the lizard is being trained to, or the mouse is being trained to
00:05:21 press a bar or turn this way or that way in a maze. The lizard level of the human is being trained as
00:05:31 a lizard is trained, but by a human who has intentionally set up that situation for themselves
00:05:41 to train their lizard brain. The lizard brain is being trained into something incredibly subtle.
00:05:50 The new behavior is not interfering with its own activity, which is to say that it's being
00:06:01 trained into equanimity. The result, and this is where the Skinnerians would freak, which is sort

00:06:09 of poetic justice, the result of that Skinnerian conditioning of the lizard brain is that ordinary
00:06:16 experience becomes utterly spiritualized and becomes indeed a direct contact with one's
00:06:25 spiritual self or one's spiritual source. So that whereas the Skinnerians would have,
00:06:33 in their extreme form, denied that there even is a thing called subjective experience,
00:06:39 it turns out that their model can be used to explain the deepest of all subjective experiences,
00:06:48 which some people would say is the experience of God.