

How & Why Shinzen Became a Monk

00:00:00 So you were ordained a monk at Mount Koya in the Xiong'an tradition, right?

00:00:14 Correct.

00:00:15 Is that something you always wanted to do since you were a kid?

00:00:18 No, not really.

00:00:19 What I always wanted to do since I was a kid was be a samurai.

00:00:27 I saw in the 50s Japanese samurai movies when I was in middle school.

00:00:34 And I just got fascinated with the whole Japanese culture thing.

00:00:39 And that led to my learning the Japanese language in LA, going to Japanese ethnic school in

00:00:46 addition to American public school.

00:00:50 And that got me to Japan in my senior year at UCLA where I was an Asian language major.

00:01:00 And I encountered real-life Buddhist monks, but my interest in them was just because it

00:01:06 was the closest thing to ancient Japan that still exists.

00:01:11 In other words, in the temples, I mean they have telephones and electricity and all that,

00:01:16 but it's sort of like the old days, right?

00:01:19 So I was fascinated with it.

00:01:22 That would be the closest that I could get.

00:01:24 Did they have swords?

00:01:25 No, only the wisdom sword.

00:01:31 So I was hanging out in Buddhist temples just to sort of live as close as I could the fantasy

00:01:38 of ancient Japan.

00:01:40 But I wasn't meditating because that's the last thing in the world I had a proclivity

00:01:45 to do.

00:01:46 I was scattered and impatient and wimpy and all those things.

00:01:51 So I was just hanging out, having fun in the temple.

00:01:55 But I had a sense that they knew a kind of secret that they would be willing to share,

00:02:01 but they would never push on me.

00:02:03 So when I got back to the United States, I was graduating from UCLA and I thought, well,

00:02:09 I want to go to graduate school.

00:02:11 I want it to be related to Asia.

00:02:13 I'll study Buddhism because you need a lot of esoteric languages for that, and I was

00:02:18 good at languages and so forth.

00:02:20 So I was going to become an academician, a professional scholar of Buddhism.

00:02:27 I passed my prelims for a PhD at the University of Wisconsin.

00:02:33 So they sent me back to Japan to do research on a topic.

00:02:39 I decided to pick the Shingon School of Buddhism, which is the Japanese version of Vajrayana

00:02:46 practice, also known as Tantric Buddhism, Esoteric Buddhism.

00:02:51 I chose that because although many Westerners at that time were studying the Tibetan forms

00:02:57 of Vajrayana practice, no one knew about or was studying the practice as it had been preserved

00:03:05 in Japan for a thousand years.

00:03:07 So I thought, okay, I'll make this my academic bailiwick, my specialty.

00:03:12 I'll be the expert in the Western world on the Japanese version of Vajrayana practice.

00:03:20 So I went there with that in mind, with that goal.

00:03:25 But when I got there, they wouldn't teach me anything because it's for self-transformation,

00:03:32 not just as an intellectual curiosity.

00:03:36 So they said the only way that I could learn it is if I was willing to become a monk and

00:03:43 live in the temple.

00:03:45 So in order to be able to write my PhD thesis, I...

00:03:49 You became a monk just so you could write your PhD thesis?

00:03:53 Pretty much.

00:03:55 But what happened is that my motivation shifted once I started to live in the temple and once

00:04:03 I started to get some instruction in the practice, I realized there was a huge potential there

00:04:11 for me personally.

00:04:13 So they were very clever.

00:04:14 They put me in this situation that turned me around.

00:04:19 And then something happened, something happened in my personal life that pretty much blew

00:04:24 me away emotionally and pointed out to me the absolute necessity of seeing beyond the

00:04:35 body and the mind.

00:04:37 And that happened while I was in that first year that I was a monk there in Japan.

00:04:44 And that just changed everything for me.

00:04:47 When I was in graduate school at Wisconsin, my hero was my graduate advisor.
00:04:53 His name was Richard Robinson.
00:04:56 And he was an intellectual giant, just an intellectual giant is all I could say.
00:05:05 He could make puns in three languages simultaneously.
00:05:09 His specialty was Buddhist logic.
00:05:11 Yes, there is something called Buddhist logic.
00:05:15 It's Aristotelian syllogistic logic that was used in the Madhyamaka school of Nagarjuna.
00:05:24 Somewhat along the lines that the Greek Zeno school and so forth used logic to sort of
00:05:33 show people beyond the world.
00:05:37 What's beyond the world?
00:05:38 Anyway, he was a master of that.
00:05:41 And while I was a monk, I got this letter from the United States.
00:05:46 He had been injured in a bizarre and horrific accident.
00:05:53 A fuse blew out in his house and he went down to change it and there was no source of electricity.
00:06:01 So to light, he struck a match and there had been a gas leak there and it went up like
00:06:07 a soccer torch and just burns all over his body and horrifically, if he had lived, he
00:06:15 would have been horrifically deformed.
00:06:18 He just suffered in agony for a month and then died.
00:06:24 I thought to myself, what good is all that knowledge?
00:06:31 What good is all that intelligence if this can happen at any time to a person?
00:06:39 That made it real for me and gave me the motivation to want to see beyond the limited identity
00:06:47 with the body and the mind.