

The Hockey Stick Metaphor and Exponential Growth on the Spiritual Path ~ Shinzen Young

00:00:00 How does a person's growth on the path of liberation differ from that of a person's liberation?

00:00:07 liberation?

00:00:08 Not true for everyone, but often a person's growth on the path of liberation will follow

00:00:15 what is colloquially called a hockey stick curve.

00:00:19 The proper name for this is an exponential curve, and exponential curves have the characteristic

00:00:27 that the more you grow, the faster you grow.

00:00:33 Snowball is an example of an exponential curve.

00:00:35 The growth rate of the snowball is proportional to the surface area of the snowball.

00:00:41 So the bigger the snowball gets, the faster the snowball adds snow.

00:00:46 So the rate of growth is proportional to how much it has grown.

00:00:53 And if you have any background in calculus or analysis, you know the math behind this.

00:01:00 It's quite fundamental actually in those fields.

00:01:03 So in any event, when you start your practice, if you follow this common pattern, you do

00:01:14 grow.

00:01:15 But it seems like you're growing linear, and there's growth there, but it's not stunning.

00:01:25 It's sort of like, well, at this rate, it's going to really, really take a long time to

00:01:31 get anywhere.

00:01:33 But hopefully you persevere, and at some point, you start to notice it's really taking off.

00:01:45 And some people call this the break point in the curve.

00:01:52 As I say, it is by no means the case that everyone that follows a spiritual path goes

00:01:59 through this kind of situation.

00:02:04 But an awful lot of people do.

00:02:06 Now of course, the natural question is, at what point does this dramatic upsurge take

00:02:15 place?

00:02:16 And we can't say exactly.

00:02:18 For some people, it happens fairly early on in their practice.

00:02:22 For other people, it might take, in the most extreme case, maybe 10 or 15 years.

00:02:29 What happens at this point that makes the difference?

00:02:35 Well, there can be a lot of factors.

00:02:40 But one of them is certainly when one reaches the point where one starts to get what I call

00:02:48 the flavor of purification.

00:02:52 In other words, you start to actually detect, have a tangible experience that when you bring

00:03:02 mindful awareness to an unpleasant experience, you're purifying consciousness.

00:03:08 You can actually taste the purification happening within you.

00:03:13 It's really hard to put into words, but it's a kind of knowing that because of the way

00:03:19 I'm experiencing this moment, every moment of my future is going to have more fulfillment

00:03:27 and less suffering.

00:03:30 Another way to put it is, it's a tangible awareness that because of the way I'm experiencing

00:03:35 this moment, I'm clearing up the stored poison and pain from all my previous moments.

00:03:45 You actually sense that happening.

00:03:48 Once that taste is there, you've got a positive feedback loop going.

00:03:53 And what characterizes hockey stick growth is it's a positive feedback loop.

00:03:59 In other words, the bigger it gets, the faster it grows.

00:04:03 So once there's the positive feedback that bringing equanimity, concentration, clarity,

00:04:09 but especially equanimity to a present experience, that you can actually taste it building a

00:04:16 better future for you and cleaning out the past for you.

00:04:21 Once that happens, now you've got a positive feedback loop, and that's one of the causes

00:04:30 of this dramatic runaway growth.

00:04:36 There can be other causes also.

00:04:38 So I give people this hockey stick metaphor by way of encouragement when they're in this

00:04:46 seeming linear phase here, and it just doesn't seem like anything.

00:04:53 It seems like, yeah, growth is happening, but if the journey is a million miles and

00:04:59 in the first year I go 10 miles, that doesn't bode well.

00:05:06 But what people don't realize is that, well, maybe in the next year you'll go 100, in the

00:05:11 next year you'll go 1,000, et cetera, et cetera.

00:05:14 And at some point it becomes evident to you, you reach this sort of, oh my God, place right

00:05:22 about here where you realize that little old me can feasibly hope to experience the classic

00:05:33 results that I've read about in these ancient books.