

Shinzen Young explains 'A' in a Whole New Way

00:00:00 So, I wanted you to see my favorite t-shirt.
00:00:11 I don't know if you can really see it all that good.
00:00:16 I have a whole blog about this.
00:00:19 It's hard to miss, really.
00:00:27 Essentially, it's this concept.
00:00:33 A, big A inside a circle.
00:00:37 So, you know where I got this t-shirt?
00:00:41 So, this is crew swag from the Avengers movie.
00:00:49 This gave me a lot of geek cred at the Buddhist Geeks a couple years ago.
00:00:59 You may remember their first meeting.
00:01:03 I was the keynote speaker.
00:01:05 I wore this during the conference because the movie hadn't come out yet.
00:01:14 So, that's what gave me the geek cred.
00:01:17 I had stuff from the movie before it was available to the public.
00:01:25 So, I was over at their place and he had all this crew swag.
00:01:29 He said, you can take whatever you want.
00:01:32 And this immediately jumped out.
00:01:35 So, you may or may not have an idea of why.
00:01:41 But take a look. It's A, first letter of the alphabet, inside a circle.
00:01:49 So, does that set off any possible associations, Buddhist-wise?
00:01:56 Good guess.
00:02:03 Not completely unrelated.
00:02:07 Well, the circle, called ensō, you can look it up on Wikipedia.
00:02:14 The circle is used a lot in Zen for the obvious symbolism of fullness that is also empty.
00:02:28 For example, in Soto Zen, and actually some Renzai also,
00:02:34 when you sit, you sit with this mudra, this circular mudra.
00:02:39 This is called the Dharmadhatu Samadhi Mudra.
00:02:43 I love the name.
00:02:45 Dharmadhatu means the realm of the dharma, the realm of the absolute.
00:02:51 Samadhi is samadhi, in this case concentration, and mudra is a hand gesture.
00:02:57 So, this is sort of like the cosmic samadhi hand gesture.
00:03:01 So, I saw the circle immediately and its associations and its meanings.
00:03:09 But what really jumped out was the letter A in the middle of it.
00:03:15 It reminded me of something from the school of my original ordination,
00:03:23 which is Japanese Shingon.

00:03:26 Shingon is Japanese Vajrayana practice.

00:03:29 And as you no doubt know, visualizations are a fairly central part,

00:03:36 both in the Tibetan versions of Vajrayana and in the Japanese version.

00:03:42 And there is a practice that is done not only by the monks,

00:03:51 but by householders, the average lay people in Japan

00:03:56 that are associated with the Shingon school.

00:04:00 They're taught this very simple visualization called Ajikan.

00:04:07 So, kan means a visualization.

00:04:10 It's the same kan as in kanzeon, so it means contemplate.

00:04:18 Actually, kanzeon means see the world's sounds.

00:04:24 But by extension, contemplate and so forth.

00:04:27 So, that's this kan character.

00:04:29 Ji is the same as in kanji. It means a character.

00:04:34 So, what does A mean?

00:04:36 Well, A is not just the first letter in the English alphabet.

00:04:41 One version or another of it is the first letter in the Greek alphabet, alpha.

00:04:49 It's also the first letter in the Hebrew alphabet, aleph,

00:04:55 which pretty much sounds like alpha, and that's no coincidence.

00:04:59 And it's also the first letter in all of the alphabets of India,

00:05:04 specifically Devanagari, which is the Sanskrit alphabet used in North India.

00:05:11 A is the first letter.

00:05:13 So, this is not a coincidence.

00:05:17 The alphabet is one of the most extraordinary cases of cultural diffusion known to anthropology.

00:05:26 It was invented once.

00:05:28 There actually is just one alphabet.

00:05:31 It was invented once about 1000 BC in what's now Lebanon, essentially,

00:05:38 which was the center of Phoenician culture.

00:05:45 And the Phoenicians were sort of the northern cousins of the Israelites,

00:05:52 essentially the same language, Biblical Hebrew.

00:05:57 Phoenicians are very similar to that.

00:06:00 So, they invented this alphabet, alephbet, gimel, david, hevav, zion, in the Hebrew order.

00:06:09 And that diffused. The Greeks picked it up from the Phoenicians.

00:06:20 The Etruscans picked it up from the Greeks.

00:06:22 The Romans picked it up from the Etruscans.

00:06:25 And we, English speakers, picked it up from the Romans.

00:06:30 So, it went west, but it also went east.

00:06:34 As the Aramaic script, which is what's used to write Hebrew now,

00:06:42 that's actually Aramit, that's actually an Aramaic version of the alphabet,

00:06:48 derived from the Phoenician.

00:06:50 And then it spread and became the Arabic alphabet, used all over the Islamic world.

00:06:57 It spread further east. Aramaic script was introduced into the eastern part of the empire

00:07:07 of Alexander the Great during the Hellenistic period,

00:07:10 and was modified and became Devanagari, the alphabet used for Sanskrit.

00:07:17 That spread down into South India.

00:07:20 And the cultures influenced by India through Buddhism, Tibet.

00:07:25 In fact, if you sort of squint your eyes and look at Tibetan,

00:07:30 and you squint your eyes and look at Hebrew, it's sort of similar.

00:07:35 That's not a coincidence. That's totally amazing. That is not a coincidence.

00:07:40 The Tibetan script is derived from a form of Devanagari.

00:07:47 Devanagari is derived from essentially the same alphabet used to write Hebrew.

00:07:52 Both go back to the Phoenician, but it gets more interesting. It spreads even further.

00:07:58 So, because mantras are important in Vajrayana practice,

00:08:07 you visualize the letters, you chant the letters.

00:08:10 So, when the Japanese picked up Vajrayana, with it came a knowledge of how to write Sanskrit

00:08:24 in an Indic alphabet. Now, they write with a brush,

00:08:30 but they write the letters of a modified form of Devanagari called Siddham alphabet.

00:08:38 So, to this day, monks in my school learn how to write the mantras in the actual Indic script,

00:08:52 not relying on kanji or Chinese characters or kana.

00:08:57 So, that means that all the way from Japan in the east to England and Wales in the west,

00:09:13 that single alphabet spread, diffused.

00:09:17 So, the first letter of the alphabet is A or Aleph or A.

00:09:28 And in the Sanskrit language, as in the Greek language,

00:09:35 A or An, it's the same thing, is negation.

00:09:41 It's the negation, right? Symmetry, symmetric, asymmetric.

00:09:47 Think of any Greek word and the opposite of it, the negation of it will have an A.

00:09:58 What are some other examples?

00:10:00 Typical, atypical. Great. What are some other examples?

00:10:07 Something else? We use that one?

00:10:11 Atheistic. Without Theos, without God.

00:10:16 So, the letter A is the great negator.

00:10:24 So, the contemplation of the letter A is used to,

00:10:38 not at first to develop, of course, concentration power through

visualization,

00:10:44 but then to lead you to the insight of the great negation.

00:10:53 What is the great negation?

00:10:55 Well, the unborn state.

00:10:59 And what is the unborn state?

00:11:02 Well, you've all meditated on it many, many times with my system.

00:11:06 Gone. Okay?

00:11:09 So, A stands for gone.

00:11:11 As the source of all things.

00:11:15 The great, the rich nothingness, the nada, the nihil,

00:11:23 the nihil par excellence, the nothing par excellence.

00:11:28 Whence our sensory experience arises and whither it returns,

00:11:33 moment by moment, whether we notice that or not,

00:11:36 and as we notice it more and more, we're called more and more enlightened.

00:11:41 So, it immediately jumped out to me that, wow, this is a really cool t-shirt.

00:11:46 Because it's got both the ensoul, which is sort of like the Zen symbol for the rich nothingness,

00:11:58 and it's got the ah, the alpha privative, it's called.

00:12:03 The A that negates, symbolizing the primordial state of the unbornness.

00:12:12 Aji honkusho, they say in Japanese.

00:12:15 The character ah points to the original face.

00:12:22 They don't use that phrase, but the un, before your parents were born, you know, the Zen expression.

00:12:28 Before your parents were born, before your parents were born, right?

00:12:36 Before expansion and contraction separated, you had a face.

00:12:41 What was it?

00:12:43 Well, it would be the face of zero now, wouldn't it?

00:12:46 The primordial unborn.

00:12:48 So, I thought, there's a lot of Buddhist meaning in the Avengers movie.

00:12:57 So, that was the piece of crew swag that I grabbed.