How is Shinzen's teaching distinctive? Mathematics & 'Taking the Mist out of Mysticism.'

00:00:00 I'd like to define mindfulness as a three-fold attentional skill set consisting of concentration
00:00:12 power, sensory clarity, and equanimity.
00:00:16 So to the extent that I am a quote meditation teacher, I teach concentration power because
00:00:23 that's universal to any form of meditation.
00:00:27 To the extent that I am a mindfulness teacher, I also emphasize the sensory clarity and the
00:00:33 equanimity.
00:00:35 Then there is the extent to which I sort of have my own distinctive way of going about
00:00:41 mindfulness and that definitely has certain distinctive characteristics.
00:00:54 A lot of it goes to my background.
00:00:56 I have a pretty solid amateur knowledge of science and mathematics and that has informed
00:01:09 the way that I teach mindfulness in a very, very deep way.
00:01:15 One of the things that you learn if you get into the physical sciences or mathematics
00:01:23 at any kind of depth is you learn habits of precision in expression and thinking.
00:01:32 Habits of precision.
00:01:33 Of precision.
00:01:34 That's correct.
00:01:35 In other words, in ordinary colloquial English, force, impulse, energy, potential, momentum,
00:01:53 action, and so forth, they all sort of sound like the same thing and we might use them
00:01:59 interchangeably on occasion.
00:02:02 But in physics, each one of those words that I mentioned means something completely different
00:02:08 and distinct.
00:02:09 Each one is defined very, very carefully and in many cases it took centuries for that precision
00:02:20 of language to be honed and perfected.
00:02:24 For example, in the area of mathematics, if you take a beginning calculus class, you learn
00:02:32 the definition of something called the derivative of a function.
00:02:39 I remember that.
00:02:40 You took that?
00:02:41 I did.
00:02:42 I don't remember.
00:02:43 I remember those words.
00:02:44 I don't remember what they were.
00:02:45 You may remember some.
00:02:46 You may remember.
00:02:47 I remember a volume of a function but I can't remember what it was.
00:02:50 Well, you may remember an expression along the lines of, for any epsilon, however small,
00:02:58 there is a delta such that if delta is the absolute value of etc., etc., etc.

00:03:03 Sure.
00:03:04 Well, anyway, that's the definition.
00:03:06 That's part of the definition of the limit of a ratio that's used to define a derivative.
00:03:14 In any event, it's defined with this, it's like incredibly subtle and incredibly complicated
00:03:22 and you have to read it over and over and over and over again until it finally sort
00:03:27 of registers and then after you've read it about a hundred times, it's like, oh, of course,
00:03:35 it's so natural, it's so obvious.
00:03:38 Now, what they don't tell you in your beginning calculus book and what would have helped me
00:03:44 a lot if they had told me was that that definition of the derivative was not the one that Newton,
00:03:53 who invented calculus, used.
00:03:56 That was the result of generation upon generation, a good 17, 18, 19, yeah, like a good 250 years
00:04:10 after Newton of the finest mathematical minds, Euler, Gauss, Cauchy, Weierstrass.
00:04:17 I know most people have never heard of these people but they're among the mathematical
00:04:25 geniuses of the Western world.
00:04:27 Each one of them contributed something to that definition that the others hadn't seen.
00:04:33 That is the distillation of 300 years of contention, discussion, and thinking things over, the
00:04:48 end result of which is this incredibly precise, incredibly powerful concept.
00:04:56 Well, you get used to dealing with that level of precision and you get used to the notion
00:05:02 that you're going to have to really think about the definitions and read and reread
00:05:06 and reread because it's worth it because an ordinary high school student who is willing
00:05:19 to come back over and over and over again will be able to understand this as well as
00:05:25 those, better than those mathematical geniuses because their stored wisdom is there.
00:05:31 I like to think of myself as on a mission to take the mist out of mysticism.
00:05:41 I think it can be done.
00:05:42 Mist out of mysticism.
00:05:43 Yup.
00:05:44 It can, using mysticism not in the sense of new age airy-fairy but in the sense of classical
00:05:50 mystical experience as exists inside the great traditions of the world, essentially contemplative
00:05:58 experience.
00:05:59 I'm academically, I said that I have a good amateur's knowledge of science and math but
00:06:09 I have a professional academic trained knowledge of comparative mysticism and Asian languages
00:06:15 and Buddhist studies and so forth.
00:06:17 That was my degree in graduate school, my degree program.
00:06:23 I sort of bring a very strong scholarship background because of knowing most of the
00:06:30 Asian languages in which the technologies of internal exploration of the east are encoded.
00:06:37 Then I have this scientific thing which causes me to be extremely precise about how I define
00:06:45 terms.
00:06:46 People that work with me have to be willing to put up with that but it saves them a lot
00:06:50 of time in the end.
00:06:51 How so?
00:06:52 Because they're able to eventually communicate and conceptualize the entire path to classical
00:06:59 enlightenment precisely in words.

00:07:04 That's taking the mist out of mysticism.
00:07:06 So you ask me what's distinctive, I bring a scholastic background.
00:07:11 I bring a science background.
00:07:16 That informs the whole way that I teach.
00:07:24 Because I have this sort of broad view of world meditative practice, I've created a
00:07:32 system that is a framework within which all of the major innovations in historical innovations
00:07:52 in the contemplative technologies from the past, all of those major innovations can be
00:08:02 formulated within the framework that I've created.
00:08:05 I call it five ways to know yourself as a spiritual being.
00:08:09 Each one of those five ways represents a distinct innovation that happened in history but I've
00:08:16 reformulated it into modern secular language and placed it all on a universal framework
00:08:26 within the mindfulness tradition.