

Is Fixation 'THE' Necessary Cause for Suffering? ~ Shinzen Young

00:00:00 You'll recall our conversation about necessary causes. I find this very interesting because,

00:00:15 as I mentioned, one layer of necessary cause can have a deeper layer of necessary cause

00:00:24 underneath it that may or may not be evident until we investigate.

00:00:32 So Sasaki Roshi, who as we speak is 104 years old, the oldest living Buddhist master and

00:00:43 still has a complete functional teaching load at that age, he talks about a necessary cause

00:00:51 for suffering also. It's clearly related to tanha, but it's not the same word. He doesn't

00:00:59 use that very often. There is a word in Japanese that means tanha, shujaku. But I've hardly

00:01:08 ever heard him talk about shujaku. Instead he says, jiko wo kotei suru koto wa yoroshiku

00:01:20 nai, meaning it is not a good thing to fixate the self. He talks about fixation as a necessary

00:01:31 cause of suffering. All you have to do is unlearn the habit of fixation and you can

00:01:37 pass all the koans and you will be enlightened and happy.

00:01:45 So what I find interesting in this formulation is that he uses a related but different word,

00:01:55 subtly but significantly different word for the necessary cause for suffering.

00:01:59 And it doesn't have the connotation for the positive.

00:02:04 Well it has a very different, I mean if you say craving it has a certain reverberation.

00:02:12 If you say fixation, even though it's related, it has another reverberation. And the reverberation

00:02:20 of fixation is well that's starting to sound like a global physical parameter in the information

00:02:27 processing circuitry of the nervous system. A global physical parameter.

00:02:33 I mean I got it.

00:02:35 Examples of global physical parameters in nature would be viscosity in a hydrodynamic

00:02:42 system or resistance or impedance in an electrical system.

00:02:56 Didn't the Buddha talk about a potter's wheel having friction?

00:03:05 I seem to vaguely remember a metaphor like that but I don't remember the specific.

00:03:09 It's like the potter's wheel if it has friction versus when it moves smoothly.

00:03:14 We're going to have to look that up. That sounds extremely interesting if you would

00:03:18 find that for me. That might be, wow, we should definitely look that up. That's a homework

00:03:24 assignment.

00:03:25 There we go.

00:03:29 And actually friction in a mechanical system. So if something analogous to electrical resistance

00:03:43 or hydrodynamic viscosity or friction and so forth, if something analogous to that is

00:03:56 also a necessary cause for suffering, then that sort of makes us think, well, that's

00:04:03 starting to sound more like talking about the brain and the nervous system. Whereas

00:04:10 craving is somewhat, I mean, sure, we know there are centers, etc., etc.

00:04:16 Right, and we're connected to a sense of self that's craving versus fixation that

00:04:19 something's happening in the system.

00:04:21 That's sort of like something that either happens, in nature things freeze, they melt.

00:04:28 So what is particularly interesting is if we think about a parameter like what's called

00:04:36 the Reynolds number. Now this is a characteristic of flow systems. There's a way of computing

00:04:50 a parameter which characterizes the flow regimen, flow regime. So I won't go into the details

00:05:01 obviously, but if you have a flow field and its Reynolds number exceeds a certain value

00:05:08 then it goes turbulent. But if it isn't at that level, it's smooth and laminar.

00:05:18 So if suffering were analogous to turbulence in the flow of the senses, I'm not saying

00:05:28 it is, but let's say it were, then we could model. And if non-turbulence, or if the turbulence

00:05:54 was dependent on some sort of parameter that we could identify with the physical functioning

00:06:00 of the nervous system. For example, there's something called the attentional

blink, which

00:06:07 I won't go into the details, but it basically measures how much fixation there is in your

00:06:12 moment by moment concentration. And that can be measured now with science.

00:06:18 By the movement of the eye you mean?

00:06:21 No, I mean it's a blink metaphorically, not physically. That's why I say I'm not going

00:06:27 to go into details. There's a lot to say about it. You can look it up on the internet. But

00:06:32 essentially it's something that can be measured now with reaction times. And it's physical,

00:06:41 it's not subjective. It can be objectively measured and it's thought to correlate with

00:06:46 the degree to which one is inappropriately holding on to things.

00:06:51 Really?

00:06:52 Yes.

00:06:53 Wow.

00:06:54 And therefore ...

00:06:55 But there's a judgment there, appropriate and inappropriate.

00:06:59 Well, no there's not, and that's why I'm not going to go into the whole ...

00:07:03 Got it, got it.

00:07:04 Basically, well I guess I have to now.

00:07:06 I'm sorry.

00:07:09 Let's say that you're given a sequence of sensory events, and your job is to track the

00:07:15 sensory events. If you inappropriately hold on to a previous event, you're going to blink

00:07:25 or miss the arising of the next event.

00:07:28 Oh yeah.

00:07:29 So what they found is in meditators, there's less of that.

00:07:33 Oh, okay.

00:07:35 Seeming to indicate ...

00:07:37 And it's more presence?

00:07:39 Well, it's related to sensory clarity, but it's also related to the equanimity of not

00:07:44 inappropriately holding.

00:07:47 So we're already beginning to get some ...

00:07:50 And this is completely objective. It doesn't require any self-report, because it's either

00:07:55 sought or you didn't. I mean, that's a self-report, but it's not really because they present it

00:08:02 and you either click or you don't.

00:08:05 It's not like, well yeah, I remembered that, I'm going to tell you. So it's very objective

00:08:13 in what it's measuring. Now I'm not saying that that correlates to what Sasaki Roshi

00:08:19 calls fixation, but it's already beginning to be a glow... It doesn't matter what you're

00:08:25 attending to, this phenomenon could be in any of the senses. It's already beginning

00:08:30 to look at possibly another necessary cause for suffering. If something like the attentional

00:08:38 blink is related to what Sasaki Roshi calls fixation, and then you can untrain that, or

00:08:48 maybe cause an intervention that prevents it of some sort. I don't know what, but let's

00:08:57 say it's possible to do that.

00:08:59 Now we're talking about eliminating other kinds of necessary causes for suffering. Or

00:09:07 let's just say that we take the early Buddhist one, tanha. So when you have tanha, all you've

00:09:20 got to do to experience nirvana is get rid of tanha. In other words, all you've got to

00:09:28 do is knock that card and the house of cards that is the suffering falls.

00:09:34 Let's say that what the Buddha called tanha is actually on the second tier of that house

00:09:43 of cards. Let's say that at a deeper tier, there's something that has to happen physiologically

00:09:52 in your nervous system for tanha to arise. Hypothetically, that is not unreasonable.

00:10:03 That means any and all tanha, not just craving for cocaine or shopping, but any and all.

00:10:10 Let's say that there is a necessary cause behind the necessary cause. And the necessary

00:10:18 cause that is behind a necessary cause is completely neurophysiological in nature. Then

00:10:28 there could be interventions that directly address that neurophysiological.

00:10:32 So you knock out the physiological necessary condition for tanha, therefore you knock out

00:10:44 tanha, therefore you knock out what blocks perfection. So theoretically, or potentially,

00:10:55 any piece of research into craving, if it were done very deeply, might unlock a key

00:11:08 physiological mechanism. What I find interesting is that you can't get much

funding for research

00:11:19 on enlightenment, but you can get funding for research on drug addiction.

00:11:31 But if research on drug addiction were to go very, very deep and very, very broad, it's

00:11:41 possible that the necessary cause for tanha could be found and eliminated. Which would

00:11:50 mean, if we take the Buddhist model, that there would be a physiological, and don't

00:11:59 ask me what kind, because I don't know. If I did know, I'd get the Nobel Prize. I have

00:12:03 no idea. Is it some super kind of biofeedback? Is it fMRI biofeedback? Is it TMS stimulation?

00:12:11 Is it what they call DREADS, which sounds bad, but they're like these...

00:12:17 Sounds like a hair stand.

00:12:19 No, it's designer drugs for designer receptors. It's like the cutting edge of the cutting

00:12:26 edge of neuroscience. Anyway, who knows what, but if there were a way to knock out the necessary

00:12:33 cause for the necessary cause, and it was purely physiological, then nirvana would actually

00:12:39 simply happen. Now, what I find the delicious notion is that you can get funding for craving

00:12:50 research, and you can get funding for deep and broad craving research, and you can get

00:12:55 funding from Republicans, gladly, for deep and broad craving research. Therefore, it

00:13:03 could come to pass that Republicans become responsible for the entire world of becoming

00:13:13 Buddhist.

00:13:14 There we go. That was good. That was good.