

Kriyas & the Cloud of Unknowing ~ Shinzen Young

00:00:00 What is the most fascinating thing about meditation?

00:00:06 One of the fascinating things about meditation for me is its universality.

00:00:14 If you think of the enormous diversity of cultures and doctrines and philosophies around the world,

00:00:24 it's rather extraordinary that when it comes down to the kinds of experiences that people have when they meditate,

00:00:34 it's more or less the same all around the world.

00:00:39 Certain basic things happen that seem to be quite independent of cultures,

00:00:46 and even of the underlying doctrines and theologies and worldview of the practitioners.

00:00:56 An interesting case of this is with regards to the phenomenon of kriyas.

00:01:08 Kriya is something that is well known in the meditative systems that come from India or are influenced by India.

00:01:21 It's spontaneous movements that can be at one end very mild and subtle,

00:01:29 and at the other end bizarre and intense, and anything in between.

00:01:36 It's spontaneous movements that are looked upon as a releasing process.

00:01:43 There's a fascinating book that was written maybe in the 15th century, something like that.

00:01:52 It was written in English, but that would mean it was written in Middle English, Chaucerian English, pre-Shakespeare English.

00:02:02 The book is called The Cloud of Unknowing, and you can read it in a modern English translation.

00:02:10 There have been many made. I like the one that was done by my friend, Father William Johnston,

00:02:18 who is a Catholic Jesuit priest and very long-term practitioner of Zen meditation.

00:02:28 He's got a nice translation, and because he has experience, he is qualified, I think, to translate these texts.

00:02:36 There's this fascinating book. It's anonymous. It's small.

00:02:41 It was probably written back in the 1400s or 1500s, called The Cloud of Unknowing.

00:02:49 What's interesting is it's used by the Catholic Church, but it's also used by some Protestants,

00:02:55 at least the Anglican community, what we would call Episcopalian in the United States, certainly makes use of it.

00:03:05 In fact, it's a kind of English spiritual classic.

00:03:09 When I was first doing meditation in Japan, when I was being trained in the early 70s at Mount Koya,

00:03:17 and I was undergoing a hundred-day isolation practice, I kept that book by me, actually, as a kind of inspiration,

00:03:29 even though I was doing Buddhist practice, because it seemed very germane to what I was experiencing.

00:03:35 You might wonder what the somewhat strange word, unknowing, means.

00:03:40 Well, unknowing is the process of having equanimity with the need to know,

00:03:48 letting go of the need to know so that you can know in a new way, an intuitive spiritual way.

00:03:59 So, very suggestive, interesting title.

00:04:02 St. Thomas Aquinas, who is the standard authority on philosophy in the Catholic Church, said,

00:04:11 I hope I'm not chopping the Latin too bad,

00:04:14 Deum tamquam per ignorantiam cognoscimus.

00:04:20 We know God directly through a very special kind of not knowing.

00:04:27 The Cloud of Unknowing is a sort of step-by-step manual for how to do this.

00:04:35 In there, there is a clear description of Kriyas.

00:04:41 Now, mind you, we're talking something like 15th century, we're talking Western culture,
00:04:49 we're talking a completely Christian environment,
00:04:53 we're talking about people that would have known little, if anything, about India,
00:04:58 certainly would not be at all familiar with any Indic concepts regarding spiritual practice.
00:05:07 But that book, The Cloud of Unknowing, has a clear description of the phenomenon of Kriyas.
00:05:15 And I just thought that's like fascinating.
00:05:18 Clearly, the person that wrote the book was what is called a spiritual director.
00:05:24 That means he was in charge of guiding people in their meditation practice,
00:05:28 and he saw this phenomenon happening.
00:05:31 What's interesting is that he points out that people have a tendency to think that
00:05:41 these strange movements and idiosyncratic sort of gestures and whimsical forms of behavior and whatever
00:05:53 are a sign of spiritual progress.
00:05:55 It's like, apparently in that day, people thought that this proves that the Spirit is within you or something like that.
00:06:04 The author of The Cloud of Unknowing was totally contemptuous of that point of view
00:06:11 and pointed out essentially what I mentioned in my first segment about the Kriyas,
00:06:19 which is that the name of the game is to neither desire them nor suppress them.
00:06:26 You just have to sort of let them do their thing.
00:06:30 It's just fascinating to me how there's a kind of universality across time and space
00:06:40 with regards to the types of phenomena that come up when we practice
00:06:46 and also with regards to how mature or immature people are about these types of phenomena.
00:06:57 They tend to be either mature or immature in similar ways.
00:07:01 They tend to have effective ways of dealing with things or non-effective ways of dealing with things
00:07:09 in more or less similar ways and so forth.
00:07:13 So anyway, I think if you're on the spiritual path, you might enjoy reading that book,
00:07:21 The Cloud of Unknowing.