

World Mysticism (with a capital 'M') ~ Shinzen Young

00:00:00 So I will not spare you the Sanskrit.

00:00:07 Atah yoga nushasanam, yogas chitta vritti nirodhah,

00:00:17 tathah drashtu svayam pevasthah.

00:00:21 That is the opening lines of the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali

00:00:28 that Mark alluded to.

00:00:31 It's quite extraordinary.

00:00:34 Sutra in the Buddhist sense sometimes generically just means scripture,

00:00:42 like chant the sutras and so forth.

00:00:45 Pali pronunciation is suta.

00:00:49 Although in a more specific sense, sutra means the discourses of the historical Buddha.

00:00:57 It's a certain section within the Buddhist literature.

00:01:03 However, within the broader context of Indic civilization, sutra has a different meaning.

00:01:12 It's a literary form.

00:01:15 And the point of this literary form is to condense a science into the shortest possible exposition in terms of numbers of syllables.

00:01:34 So the Yoga Sutras describe what's called Ashtangita yoga,

00:01:41 or the eight limbs of yoga, sometimes called Raja yoga.

00:01:47 And you'll also notice that Buddhism is Arya Ashtangika Marga,

00:01:53 and Buddhism has an eightfold path also.

00:01:57 Now, even the words are the same.

00:02:00 The eight elements are not the same,

00:02:02 but clearly there's influence going back and forth.

00:02:14 What it says in Sanskrit is,

00:02:18 Yoga is citta vritti nirodha.

00:02:22 It is the cessation of the fluctuations of consciousness.

00:02:29 Sadādhara-sthira, then and only then, does the true observer abide in its nature.

00:02:40 It presents a practice that is very similar in many ways to Buddhism.

00:02:52 On the other hand, it presents a conceptual framework that in some ways is the diametric opposite.

00:03:01 Because what we call gone is nirodha, that's cessation.

00:03:10 But whereas in Buddhism it's interpreted as no-self,

00:03:15 in a Hindu context, particularly in the Yoga Sutra context,

00:03:24 it's interpreted as the true self, the true observer.

00:03:29 If you are just involved in concepts,
00:03:36 like a scholar or a devotee,
00:03:44 then it's an endless argument who has the right formulations.
00:03:55 But if you're involved in practice,
00:04:01 you realize that there are many alternative ways to describe the effects of the practice.
00:04:14 And it is also true that sometimes identical vocabulary isn't referring to the same thing at all.
00:04:24 So to develop a kind of sensitivity where you know that you can detect when the same words refer to something different,
00:04:35 and you can also detect where very different words may refer to very similar things.
00:04:42 That takes a little bit of practice.
00:04:49 There was a request in the notes for me to talk about Jewish mysticism tonight, apropos of Shabbat.
00:05:01 I'd love to talk about that, but I thought I would frame it in a somewhat larger context and talk about world mysticism.
00:05:13 And then how Jewish and other ones fit in and how what we do fits in.
00:05:21 So what comes to your mind when you hear the English word mysticism?
00:05:33 Does something pop into your head?
00:05:37 Sweat lodge?
00:05:46 Something that used to happen to the saints and doesn't happen to regular people like us.
00:05:55 Something very special? This is interesting.
00:05:58 Other people? What pops into your head when you hear that?
00:06:04 Contemplation?
00:06:08 Sacredness?
00:06:11 Now we're mentioning the word mysticism. It's got an ism on it.
00:06:18 That word specifically.
00:06:22 Direct experience of truth.
00:06:25 Interesting. Okay.
00:06:27 Did you say direct experience of truth?
00:06:32 A whole collection of traditions, spiritual traditions.
00:06:37 Cool. Well, let me tell you what pops into my head as soon as I hear that word.
00:06:47 What pops into my head is ambiguity.
00:06:58 It is dangerous to talk about mysticism as simply a word without realizing that it is used in two very different senses.
00:07:18 And the two senses that it is used in is actually rather interesting.
00:07:26 So in the sort of colloquial sense, it connotes new agey realms of power kinds of unusual experiences.
00:07:50 Visions, psychic powers, that sort of thing.

00:07:59 But as a technical term that would be used by scholars, historians, people who specialize in academic study of religion,
00:08:14 it refers to something quite different.
00:08:18 It refers to the contemplative endeavor, what we're doing here.
00:08:24 So the first thing one needs to be careful about if you're having a discussion with someone about, quote, mysticism,
00:08:34 is to be sure that you're talking about the same mysticism.
00:08:41 Because you could end up in a lot of misunderstanding.
00:08:53 So what's the relationship between the two meanings of mysticism?
00:09:01 Well, the way that I sort of look at it, you can think of the mystical path as a journey from the surface of consciousness to the source of consciousness.
00:09:17 And in making that journey, some people encounter some weird, unusual stuff in the intermediate realms between surface and source.
00:09:35 The intermediate realms are, those are the realms of the archetypes.
00:09:39 Those are the realms in which gods, ghosts, ancestors, angels can actually be experienced sensorially, perhaps vividly.
00:09:57 So in passing from surface to source and going through that intermediate material, some people,
00:10:06 or in passing through that intermediate realm, some people have weird experiences.
00:10:13 That's mysticism with, I call it mysticism with a small m.
00:10:21 Not everyone who passes from surface to source encounters weird, unusual stuff.
00:10:30 But some people do.
00:10:34 Now, when you touch the formless source, the salient defining characteristic of touching the formless source is that it profoundly changes your notion of who you are.
00:10:54 It's like a paradigm shift.
00:11:01 And that's mysticism with a capital M. That's the way I describe it.
00:11:09 So, as several people mentioned, all around the world we find actually both kinds of mystical experience.
00:11:25 But the mysticism with a capital M is of course what we're mostly interested in here.
00:11:35 Now, for many people, mystical experience in that sense comes about as the result of systematic practice.
00:11:51 However, it is important to realize that sometimes people come to these experiences without any formal practice at all.
00:12:04 It just happens.
00:12:08 Maybe once or twice a year I get an email from someone who hadn't done any meditation,
00:12:19 but just one day, like one person put it, one day I was just big.
00:12:29 Or one day the world and myself became paper thin.

00:12:40 There but not there.

00:12:42 And it's permanent.

00:12:44 It just happens.

00:12:46 Now that indicates to me that this is a natural phenomenon.

00:12:58 The other thing that indicates to me that it's a natural, in other words, the fact that it just happens without cultivation.

00:13:06 The other thing that indicates to me that it's a natural phenomenon is the relative universality of contemplative or mystical practice around the world.

00:13:22 So, if you take the Yoga Sutras, for example, it divides into these eight steps.

00:13:33 Yama, Niyama, Asana, Pranayama, Pratyahara, Dharana, Dhyana, Samadhi.

00:13:41 The first couple steps are about religious customs and ethics.

00:13:55 Sort of like getting your act together as a human being in terms of character.

00:14:04 And that roughly maps onto what in Buddhism is called Shila.

00:14:10 And that also maps onto the first few stages of Saint Teresa's model, which is in a book called Las Moradas, the interior castle.

00:14:25 It starts with this sort of like working on your behavior, working on your issues, that kind of thing.

00:14:32 Then in the Yoga Sutras, it proceeds through, and of course this is what makes the Indic system in some ways superior to the Western system.

00:14:48 It talks about Asana, Pranayama.

00:14:53 So, that means working with the breath and postures.

00:14:58 That the notion that posture has an impact on consciousness was not appreciated in Western mysticism the way it was in the East.

00:15:16 Okay, so then I'm going to skip some details, but then you go through a sequence of ever deepening concentration.

00:15:32 And that's also what's in Teresa's interior castle.

00:15:41 After you've sort of got your act together, then she gives many benchmarks over many years, decades of developing more and more concentration power.

00:15:55 Now, the Yoga Sutras describe the same thing.

00:16:00 And that corresponds roughly to the Buddhist Jhana system, the absorption system.

00:16:11 So, we can see that these maps in general will have a component of working on your character, they'll have a component of building concentration power.

00:16:27 Then they'll have a component of something else.

00:16:36 But here's where things can get very confusing, vocabulary-wise.

00:16:42 Because in Buddhism, that something else is looked upon as a kind of transformation of consciousness.

00:16:59 A new way of understanding who you are.

00:17:04 And it's called Prajna.

00:17:07 So in Buddhism, it precedes Shila, Samadhi, Prajna.

00:17:13 When you read St. Teresa, her interior castle proceeds exactly the same way.
00:17:20 Work on yourself as a person, then all these different stages of ever deepening absorption.
00:17:29 And then what's amazing is to read very late in life.
00:17:34 She had this experience of ...
00:17:39 And you can see that she's struggling to convey how different it is from everything she experienced before.
00:17:49 And she refers to it as an intellectual vision.
00:17:54 But she says that's not really what I'm talking about, because it wasn't a vision.
00:18:01 And it's not intellectual.
00:18:07 But something shifted.
00:18:09 And the salient feature of that was that ...
00:18:17 Well, the way that she put it, the self-forgetting is so great that it seems as though the soul no longer exists.
00:18:31 I mean, anyone with a Buddhist background immediately sees insight into no-self.
00:18:38 And it's permanent. It's permanent.
00:18:42 But along with the paradigm of nothingness comes also the paradigm of oneness.
00:18:50 They're related.
00:18:52 So she also describes this experience as ...
00:18:57 She says the oneness with God is like the oneness of water in water.
00:19:09 Now, she's writing in the 16th century, she's actually writing for the Inquisition.
00:19:18 You know, that they would approve what she had to say, because you had to get everything passed, right?
00:19:28 By the thought police of Catholic Europe.
00:19:34 And it had no difficulty passing.
00:19:37 And it became the standard model used by the Catholic Church to this day.
00:19:46 And when I first read this, and I saw, my God, this maps on so clearly to Buddhist experience,
00:19:58 it totally blew my mind.
00:20:01 Because this is 16th century Spain.
00:20:04 A completely different world.
00:20:07 Why should this map on to something that someone wrote in 6th century Sri Lanka?
00:20:15 These worlds had no contact whatsoever.
00:20:19 And yet they're describing roughly similar maps.
00:20:22 So that's mysticism with a capital M.
00:20:28 What can be a little confusing is that in the Yoga Sutras,
00:20:35 they don't explicitly talk about the wisdom function as being in some way

different from the concentration process.

00:20:52 However, it's implied in there.

00:20:57 The last three steps in Yoga are called Dharana, Dhyana, Samadhi.

00:21:04 So Dharana means holding.

00:21:10 That's the stage in concentration where your attention wanders and you have to bring it back.

00:21:17 Your attention wanders and you have to bring it back.

00:21:20 You've probably noticed that.

00:21:23 That's Dharana.

00:21:27 Dhyana, your attention doesn't wander anymore.

00:21:31 The description in the Yoga Sutras is that it's like an unbroken stream of sesame oil.

00:21:41 When you pour oil, there's a continuity there.

00:21:46 So whatever your object of focus is, your attention stays there.

00:21:53 That's called Dhyana.

00:21:58 That is the word that corresponds to the Pali word Dhyana.

00:22:04 And clearly there's a relationship, although it's not an exact one-for-one correspondence,

00:22:13 but they're pointing to similar general directions.

00:22:19 Then there's the final stage in the Yoga path, Raja Yoga path.

00:22:26 It's called Samadhi.

00:22:28 So remember I said the trick is to know when the same word refers to different things

00:22:34 and when different words refer to the same thing.

00:22:38 It can be very tricky to have the sensitivity to be able to smell what's going on.

00:22:46 So I've seen endless arguments between Yoga people and Buddhists about Samadhi.

00:23:00 Samadhi is where it's at. Samadhi is not where it's at.

00:23:03 Samadhi is where it's at. Samadhi is not where it's at.

00:23:07 They're not realizing that they're not really talking about quite the same thing.

00:23:14 It's confusing because it's the same syllables and it's closely related, but not exactly the same.

00:23:26 Within the Buddhist context, well I showed you the three steps in Buddhism.

00:23:31 Shila, Samadhi, Prajna. That's called the Trini-Shikshani, the threefold training.

00:23:39 It's another way of organizing the eightfold path.

00:23:47 So within this context and in general within Buddhism, as a general principle,

00:23:54 Samadhi is a generic term.

00:23:58 Anything from a light focus to a concentrated state so profound that you

don't need to move for days

00:24:10 and your physiology is so altered that you might be mistaken for dead.

00:24:18 Anything along that whole continuum in Buddhism is called Samadhi.

00:24:25 But in the Yoga Sutras, only the deepest part is referred to as Samadhi.

00:24:34 And there's actually two kinds of Samadhi distinguished in the Yoga system.

00:24:42 There is Sabija Samadhi and Nirvija Samadhi.

00:24:49 Samadhi with a seed and Samadhi without a seed.

00:24:53 So what is a seed? A seed is a sensory object that you're focusing on.

00:24:59 So let's say for example that you were focusing on music.

00:25:08 You wanted to make music your path to enlightenment.

00:25:13 So you start listening to music.

00:25:19 I went through a period of about three years where I was really bored with meditation.

00:25:27 And the only way I could get myself interested was by listening to classical music.

00:25:35 But at least it kept me going.

00:25:39 So you're listening to the music and your attention wanders and you bring it back.

00:25:45 Your attention wanders and you bring it back.

00:25:47 At some point your attention doesn't wander so much anymore.

00:25:51 Then at some point, so you know, bring it back, that's dharma.

00:25:58 It doesn't wander anymore, it just stays there, that's dhyana in the yoga sense of the word dhyana.

00:26:06 But then you can have this experience where there's just the music

00:26:12 and there's no sense of an eye listening to the music.

00:26:17 You become the music.

00:26:21 That's sabhija samadhi.

00:26:24 Well, how does that come about from the paradigm that we've been using here?

00:26:33 It's simple. There's only so much real estate in consciousness.

00:26:39 If 100% of the awareness is going into the music,

00:26:43 that leaves zero awareness to go back to see in, hear in, feel in.

00:26:51 So it's identical to Sasaki Roshi's, to the first part of Sasaki Roshi's koan,

00:27:06 how do you become free from yourself when you see the flower?

00:27:10 Well, he wants you to have a visual experience of just sight and no reactive self.

00:27:18 So that's sabhija samadhi.

00:27:23 It's essentially, well, yeah, that's what, but there's bija,

00:27:34 there is a sensory event there.

00:27:37 There's just all of the attention is allocated to that sensory event.

00:27:47 And back where there would have been a self,

00:27:51 where there would have been see in, hear in, feel in, there isn't that.

00:27:57 There's just the see out or the hear out.

00:28:00 But you're still seeing a flower. You're still hearing the music as sound.

00:28:13 A deeper experience is nirbija samadhi, samadhi without a seed.

00:28:22 That's formless samadhi. Well, what in the world is that?

00:28:30 That is samadhi on God.

00:28:35 That is chittavritti nirodha.

00:28:37 That is the cessation of the fluctuations of consciousness.

00:28:42 You have such a complete experience of the see out of the flower

00:28:49 or the hear out of the music that there's no fixating of the sight or the sound into a thing.

00:28:59 And so there's just the godness of the sight or sound

00:29:13 and there's just the godness of the self and they are the same godness.

00:29:23 As I say in the yoga sutras, that is described in terms of samadhi.

00:29:31 Whereas in Buddhism it would be described in terms of insight into no self and emptiness.

00:29:41 So that's the source of the argument between the Buddhist and the yoga practitioners.

00:29:49 It's an inability to realize that sometimes the same word is used in different ways

00:29:59 and sometimes different words are used to point to essentially similar things.

00:30:04 So if you attain nirbhija samadhi, you have also attained an abiding contact with God.

00:30:21 Well, not exactly an abiding contact. You can't have an abiding contact.

00:30:29 You can only have a self that returns and looks back and knows that an instant before

00:30:45 it was one with everything. It was one in a nothing experience.

00:30:55 But that's the reoccurring of a self. Enlightenment is actually a kind of self.

00:31:00 I know that's like hugely confusing. When I first heard Sasaki Roshi say that,

00:31:06 enlightenment is a kind of self. It's like, well, wait a minute.

00:31:09 That's totally contrary to what Buddhism says. Enlightenment is no self, right?

00:31:14 Well, enlightenment is an experience of no self.

00:31:21 But in the moment of experiencing gone or nirbhija samadhi,

00:31:28 in the moment of experiencing that, there's no experiencer.

00:31:32 So there's actually no conscious awareness of it.

00:31:36 But a second later, a self returns. And it has seeing, hearing, feeling

00:31:46 that represent the no self experience that it just had.

00:31:52 And as the years and decades proceed, that returning of the self as an enlightened self,

00:32:02 it becomes clearer and clearer and clearer. It has a clearer mental image.
00:32:08 It has a clearer way of being able to describe. And it has clearer emotions
00:32:17 around the experience of no self that it just had.
00:32:22 So in the yoga tradition, the goal is to attain sahaja samadhi.
00:32:32 That's at least according to some of the books. What does sahaja mean?
00:32:37 Well, sahaja means on the natch, natural. So in this case it means in daily
life.
00:32:44 It means as you're bopping around in the world thousands of times a day,
00:32:50 you have an experience of the one that is the nothing,
00:33:00 the completeness that is the cessation.
00:33:05 And then you have a clear experience of coming from that.
00:33:10 And you know where you just came from. And you know exactly what your job
is.
00:33:22 How to get back. How you get back is by not trying to get back,
00:33:30 but by completely affirming, saying yes to the re-arising of the personal
self.
00:33:40 So this is equivalent to, in our system, the working with God
00:33:57 and then seeing how we come from and return to that moment by moment.
00:34:05 But it's not formulated, as I say, in terms of wisdom or insight quite
specifically.
00:34:13 So it can be confusing. It was very confusing to me.
00:34:16 Because I thought, well, the yoga system just culminates in high
concentration.
00:34:23 It doesn't culminate in enlightenment. So it's inferior to the Buddhist
formulation.
00:34:29 But then later on I realized that that was just an artifact of the language
00:34:35 and the way things are described.
00:34:37 So all around the world there is both mystical experience with the small m,
00:34:48 the new agey, sort of mystical, shmistical realm of power stuff.
00:34:54 And then there is mystical experience with the big M.
00:34:58 But the different traditions might, the components as far as I can see,
00:35:07 the same components are always there.
00:35:10 But they may be languaged differently or there may be a different emphasis
00:35:18 that obscures the fundamental similarity.
00:35:27 In the Christian mystical tradition, oh, and I should say, well, what are the
components?
00:35:35 What are the universal components?
00:35:37 Well, I just gave you one formulation, which is shila samadhi prajna.
00:35:44 So you sort of work on yourself and you develop high concentration.
00:35:50 And then you have something that in Buddhism is described as going beyond
concentration.
00:35:57 And also Saint Teresa of Avila described it that way,

00:36:01 as going beyond concentration states.

00:36:04 So there is a change in your paradigm about what you are, what you're made of, literally.

00:36:13 But in the yoga system it's just called nirbija samadhi.

00:36:19 And you might not realize, you might think, oh, that's just more concentration.

00:36:25 But if you attain chittavrtti nirodha, the cessation of the fluctuations of consciousness,

00:36:33 whether you talk about it in those terms or not, your paradigm,

00:36:40 your model for what self is, will change.

00:36:45 And there will be a wisdom component there.

00:36:48 So one way to look at what's universal is there's work you do on yourself for yourself.

00:36:56 There's sort of like work you do to improve yourself.

00:37:03 Then there's always a description of the sequence of stages of concentration.

00:37:10 And then there is what in Buddhism is described as that which goes beyond concentration,

00:37:18 where you gain an insight, which in Buddhism is called emptiness or no-self.

00:37:26 So in the Christian way of working, the generic term for the states of high concentration is recollection,

00:37:41 meaning not to remember, but to collect back.

00:37:46 Okay, re means back, kam means together, and legere means to pick up or to gather.

00:37:55 So recollectio, in ordinary English, it means to remember.

00:38:00 But as a technical term in a Christian contemplative usage, recollection means what we in Buddhism call samadhi.

00:38:11 But if that recollection is very deep, it's called infused contemplation.

00:38:23 And that pretty much corresponds to dhyana and that kind of thing.

00:38:29 It's a very deep experience.

00:38:31 Now, one of the things that's a little bit confusing is that there is a link between concentration,

00:38:45 which is simply the ability to hold a focus.

00:38:51 There's a link between concentration and calming and tranquility.

00:38:57 And indeed, in the Buddhist system, there is a term, shamatha in Sanskrit or samatha in Pali,

00:39:06 that has both of those connotations.

00:39:10 It literally, sham means to tranquilize, and ta means to fixate.

00:39:20 So it's a single word that connotes both the tranquilizing aspect and the concentration aspect.

00:39:32 That's why in Tibetan, shamatha was translated as shi-ne.

00:39:37 Shi means tranquil, ne means abiding, meaning you're able to hold a focus

where you want.

00:39:48 However, strictly speaking, the calming aspect and the concentrating aspect,
00:39:54 although they're obviously very related, they are not identical things.

00:40:00 But you need, calming is calming, okay, but you need some calm in order to be
able to hold the focus.

00:40:09 Conversely, if you're going to hold the focus, things tend to mellow out a
little bit.

00:40:13 But in my way of thinking, they're not identical.

00:40:16 That's why all the techniques that I teach you have concentration,
00:40:21 but the focus on rest technique emphasizes the calming or tranquilizing
aspect.

00:40:30 So within the Christian way of working, the tranquilizing aspect is very much
emphasized.

00:40:42 And so another term that's used is prayer of quiet, oratio quies.

00:40:50 So the emphasis is on getting into these deep tranquil states,
00:41:07 and the paradigm for what happens in those deep tranquil states is the soul
unites with God.

00:41:17 And that is certainly a legitimate paradigm. That's a way to think about it.

00:41:23 Within the Islamic mystical way of working, we find the same elements.

00:41:34 What's Islamic mysticism called? Sufism.

00:41:39 So we find the same elements.

00:41:44 The paradigm for what happens is also similar.

00:41:54 What is supposed to happen is something called FANAQ, F-A-N-A.

00:42:02 And what that means in Arabic is nirota. It means annihilation.

00:42:14 So the sense of personal self is seen through annihilated,
00:42:23 and one experiences a FANAQ fil-lah, which means a disappearance of the
somethingness of self

00:42:35 that allows you to melt into Allah, into God.

00:42:40 So we see something roughly similar to the Christian paradigm,
00:42:48 sort of like merging with God kind of thing.

00:42:53 What about Jewish mysticism?

00:42:57 Well, Jewish mysticism has two paradigms.

00:43:01 One is something called dvekut, or in the Ashkenazic pronunciation dvekas.

00:43:10 You know that there's two pronunciations of Hebrew.

00:43:17 I was right on the transition.

00:43:20 My first Hebrew classes when I was a kid, we learned the Eastern European
pronunciation.

00:43:27 Then when Israel achieved statehood and decided to go with the Sephardic,
00:43:35 so then they shifted in my synagogue and I had to relearn the whole thing
again.

00:43:41 It's not that bad, but it really didn't sound like Hebrew.

00:43:48 But anyway, so dvekut is the proper Sephardic Israeli pronunciation.

00:43:55 And dvekut is, I guess it would be written in English, D-E-V-E-K-U-T.
00:44:06 That's the oneness paradigm. So that is there.
00:44:11 And it's talked about. And the idea is that you can achieve dvekut with anything.
00:44:19 If you fully focus on anything that you're doing, you can have this sense of,
00:44:27 it becomes a merging experience.
00:44:31 But there's another paradigm that's used in Jewish mysticism that I personally find extremely interesting.
00:44:41 Because you don't see anything like it in Christian mysticism.
00:44:52 You don't see anything like it in Islamic mysticism.
00:44:56 This second paradigm.
00:45:02 But where you do find this second paradigm is in Sasaki Roshi's formulation of Buddhism.
00:45:12 So years ago I was in Montreal, we were having a seshin, a Zen retreat,
00:45:23 at this Zen center that is like half of Leonard Cohen's house.
00:45:30 He was born in Montreal, so he gave half of his house that he owns there to make a Zen center,
00:45:38 and then he kept the other half to live in.
00:45:42 So he and I were staying in the half where he lives.
00:45:49 And so I woke up one morning and he was studying, looking at the Talmud.
00:46:01 And so I said, what are you doing?
00:46:09 And he said, well, these Talmud, that's like the Jewish sort of Abidarma, I guess you could say, to mix metaphors.
00:46:23 He said, these guys were trying to get to what Roshi is teaching, or something to that effect.
00:46:37 So there is this paradigm of Bri'a Yesh Me'ay,
00:46:52 that as I say among the western forms of mysticism, as far as I know, only Judaism has this one.
00:47:03 Judaism has the merging with God, Dev'et Kut thing, that as I say,
00:47:10 is so characteristic of the other Abrahamic religions, Christianity and Islam.
00:47:15 But Judaism has this other thing, and this other thing is actually the main paradigm.
00:47:23 What does Bri'a Yesh Me'ay mean?
00:47:27 Well, Bri'a means creation, Yesh means existence or something, or self, has all of those connotations.
00:47:42 And Me' means from, and Ayin means divine nothingness.
00:47:51 So how is it that the infinite somethings of self and world arise from the one very special nothing that is God?
00:48:10 To understand clearly that process is the central goal of Jewish mysticism.
00:48:19 I remember years ago, here in LA, having lunch with a Chabad Rabbi,

00:48:28 which is a form of, quote, ultra-orthodox.

00:48:31 And I said, sum it up for me, what's your trip about?

00:48:38 I don't think I used the word trip.

00:48:41 It was something like, okay, lay it on me, what's the final goal here?

00:48:54 He said, well, the final goal is in ordinary life,

00:49:00 to be able to, in each moment of experience, experience how that moment is coming from and returning to God.

00:49:15 And one way that that's formulated is what I just said, Bri'a Yesh Me'ayim.

00:49:23 Another way that it's formulated is in the phrase, Shifti Hashem L'Nikdi T'amid.

00:49:32 This is a really, really interesting phrase in Hebrew.

00:49:39 I spent, actually, literally an entire morning in Israel with one of the top biblical scholars.

00:49:49 I mean, secular type scholars, objective scholars, on the Hebrew language.

00:49:58 Discussing, she just filled in all of these rich connotations of the phrase that I just said in Hebrew.

00:50:12 So what it means is, literally, to, you can't even translate it into English,

00:50:28 but it means to always equate what is in front of you with God.

00:50:45 So what does it mean to equate?

00:50:49 Well, there's a superficial way that that's done in Jewish mysticism,

00:50:55 and there's a deep way that that's done.

00:50:58 The superficial way is that you use the associations of the Hebrew language

00:51:06 to constantly have things remind you, conceptually, of God.

00:51:13 So that's a sort of intellectual way of trying to be thinking about God all the time.

00:51:21 But that's just the beginning of continuous contact, though.

00:51:26 The deeper experience is not sort of using all of these associations.

00:51:34 It's not this intellectual endeavor. It's a perceptual endeavor.

00:51:40 So the deeper meaning of Shifti Hashem L'Nikdi T'amid,

00:51:45 to have God in front of your eyes all the time, is to literally have God in front of your eyes.

00:51:50 So that means that you're experiencing what's, quote, in front of your eyes,

00:51:57 in other words, what's in your senses, what you see, hear, and contact through your body.

00:52:03 You're experiencing the inner part of that, the self, and the outer part, the world.

00:52:10 You're experiencing that coming from and returning to the source moment by moment.

00:52:18 In order to be able to have that experience, how is that achieved?

00:52:23 Well, you have to be willing to go through a process called B'tul Hayesh,

00:52:31 which in Hebrew means the annihilation of the somethingness within you.

00:52:36 Sound familiar?

00:52:42 When you're gifted, or put in our terms,

00:52:51 you have to see the gone of self and world many, many, many, many, many times

00:53:02 before you start to have a clear perception of how that gone manifests,

00:53:17 how that nothing manifests all, the one nothing manifests the myriad somethings of self and world.

00:53:27 So, how does that occur?

00:53:44 Well, according to the Jewish formulation in Kabbalah,

00:53:51 it occurs through the it, meaning the manifestation of self and world.

00:54:00 It occurs through an interplay of two forces. Why am I not surprised?

00:54:07 Chesed and grura. Chesed is affirmation, expansion.

00:54:14 Grura is negation, contraction.

00:54:18 And in between these two, there is something called tzimtzum.

00:54:28 They pull apart and they create a cleft.

00:54:33 And in that cleft, self and world arise moment by moment.

00:54:41 So this should sound rather similar.

00:54:44 It is utterly extraordinary to me that Sasaki Roshi's paradigm

00:54:51 maps on this closely with the Kabbalistic point of view.

00:54:56 Because, although he's well studied within the Buddhist tradition,

00:55:04 I am sure he has no knowledge of the Jewish meditative tradition.

00:55:16 And certainly the Jewish meditative tradition that was formulated centuries and centuries ago

00:55:22 in Europe and the Middle East never heard of Sasaki Roshi.

00:55:28 So it blows my mind how similar it is.

00:55:35 So within the Buddhist tradition, if you've ever studied Zen,

00:55:44 you probably learned the Heart Sutra.

00:55:47 This is a famous sutra in the sense of scripture that's chanted.

00:55:55 And the lines go,

00:55:59 kanji zaibosagyo jin anyahara mitaji shoken gongun kaiku do issai kuyaku

00:56:07 shari shi shikifuri ku kufuri shigi

00:56:11 Okay, so when the Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara was practicing prajnaparamita,

00:56:19 he slash she clearly saw that all the five aggregates are empty

00:56:33 and that that was the secret for passing beyond all suffering.

00:56:39 And then Avalokiteshvara begins to speak to Shariputra.

00:56:47 So who is Shariputra? Shariputra was the historical Buddha's chief disciple.

00:56:54 And Shariputra is associated with the Abhidharma.

00:57:00 And the Abhidharma is this formulation in Buddhism that classifies the world

00:57:09 and sensory experience with the point of view of

00:57:15 that you can't if you sort of untangle these elements,

00:57:21 you will be able to become free.

00:57:24 So that's actually very true.

00:57:26 But the problem is that at some point people started to just read the Abhidharma
00:57:33 and not practice meditation.
00:57:35 And they equated learning these lists of categories with enlightenment.
00:57:42 So then Mahayana arose by way of reaction and said,
00:57:48 hey, just learning these lists of elements isn't going to enlighten you.
00:57:55 You have to have a direct experience of shunyata, of emptiness.
00:58:00 So Avalokiteshvara representing the Mahayana point of view speaks to Shariputra
00:58:08 representing the sort of scholastic Hinayana point of view.
00:58:13 And what does Avalokiteshvara say?
00:58:17 He says, shikhi fu i ku, ku fu i shikhi.
00:58:24 Form is emptiness, emptiness is form.
00:58:33 Now the Zen people riff on that line big time, okay,
00:58:44 because of the way it's phrased.
00:58:50 Form is emptiness, emptiness is form.
00:58:55 When a Zen teacher gives a taisho on that portion of the scripture,
00:59:01 inevitably they will say that this summarizes the entire path
00:59:12 and that the phrase, form is emptiness, shikhi fu i ku,
00:59:17 and the phrase, ku fu i shikhi, emptiness is not different from form,
00:59:24 that these are two sides to the practice.
00:59:29 Form is emptiness is bitul hayesh,
00:59:34 it's the experience of the annihilation of somethingness.
00:59:39 In terms of our system, it's flow and go, okay,
00:59:45 it's dissolving back into flow and nirodha, cessation.
00:59:52 Form is emptiness, but then that's only half of enlightenment.
00:59:58 The other half is to understand in specific how emptiness manifests form.
01:00:07 Form is emptiness, emptiness is form.
01:00:11 So how does emptiness manifest form?
01:00:15 Well, originally there is zero, but zero is inherently unstable,
01:00:24 because there is no actual zero.
01:00:27 Zero is just what comes about when all the yeses and all the noes
01:00:33 needed to create this or any conceivable universe all balance and cancel.
01:00:39 That's why the nothingness of the mystic is a rich nothingness,
01:00:45 because it contains infinite positive and negative in a cancelled out condition.
01:00:53 So, originally there is nothing, but there actually isn't a nothing.
01:00:59 There's just the cancelling of affirmation and negation.
01:01:04 So, nothing is inherently unstable and it breaks apart.
01:01:11 And part of it only knows to affirm and that expands,
01:01:16 and the other part only knows to negate and that contracts.
01:01:21 And that creates a cleft, which is the time-space volume

01:01:26 for each moment of sensory experience.

01:01:31 This is how Sasaki Roshi describes the passage from emptiness to form.

01:01:40 And it happens to be, as far as I can see, the way that the Jewish mystics describe it.

01:01:48 And I haven't seen this description anywhere else in the world.

01:01:53 That blows my mind. It's like, wow, this is really cool.

01:01:59 So, bina means to know in the sense of separating things,

01:02:11 to make discriminative knowing.

01:02:15 Da'at is to know in the biblical sense, to know in a penetrating way.

01:02:23 Like, you know by, it's like carnal knowledge.

01:02:27 You have soaked into the thing. That's da'at.

01:02:35 And Chokhmah is the wisdom that is a spiritual paradigm shift.

01:02:41 It's enlightenment.

01:02:43 That's exactly the three meanings in the word vipassana.

01:02:48 Vipassana means to separate out the strands, vipassana, to see separate.

01:02:54 But vipassana also means vipassana, to see through or into.

01:03:00 So I teach you how to separate the strands of experience,

01:03:04 and then how to let your awareness soak into them

01:03:07 so that you can see that they're just made out of vibrating space.

01:03:12 Expansion, contraction, holds them moment by moment.

01:03:16 And if you see that clearly enough, you have vipassana in the sense of insight or wisdom.

01:03:24 So in Pali vipassana, in Sanskrit vipashyana, it's one word with three connotations.

01:03:34 In the Hebrew language, they actually have three words for each of these kinds of notes,

01:03:41 one for each of these kinds of knowing.

01:03:43 But they, yes, combine it into a single acronym,

01:03:46 at least with this particular group of ultra-Orthodox Jews,

01:03:51 and it's Chabad, and that's what they're about.

01:03:55 So once again, the parallels are rather striking.

01:04:02 So when I had lunch and I said, OK, what is it, what is it, you know, what's your thing about?

01:04:14 He said, well, reayesh ma'ayim, through bitul hayesh,

01:04:21 to annihilate the somethingness of self,

01:04:25 which will then allow you to experience a special nothingness.

01:04:34 So that's the part of the path that is form, is emptiness.

01:04:39 And the Orthodox way of praying, where you, it's body prayer, you move, OK?

01:04:49 The idea is that you're trying to become like a flame without any fixation whatsoever,

01:04:55 and hopefully at some point in that process, God will blow out the flame,

01:05:04 which is exactly nirvana now, isn't it?

01:05:06 Exactly what that means, the flame gets blown out.

01:05:09 So the actual, that Orthodox Jewish body prayer that I love,

01:05:17 because it's so much better than mind prayer,

01:05:23 is, that's the whole goal.

01:05:25 You're actually trying to be, like, move like a flame and become so flowy

01:05:32 that at some point it'll get blown out and you'll experience bitul hayesh.

01:05:38 So that's the part of the path which, in terms of our system, is sort of related to the gods, right?

01:05:47 But in Zen formulation, that's shikhi fuiku, that's form is emptiness.

01:05:53 Then, when that becomes clear, then you can see the other side of the picture,

01:05:59 how it is that God breaks apart and vibrates self and world into existence,

01:06:09 and you know where you just came from.

01:06:12 Now that person that knows where it just came from

01:06:15 and knows where the world just came from, sensorially,

01:06:19 that's called an enlightened person.

01:06:25 So that the goal, according to this rabbi, was you heroically throw caution to the wind

01:06:43 and let the source annihilate the somethingness within you.

01:06:50 So that's bitul hayesh. As a result of that, you'll be gifted in daily life with bri'ayesh me'ayim.

01:07:03 And as a result of living your life that way,

01:07:08 you can optimally contribute to something called tikkun olam, the mending of the world.