

Self-Enquiry & Mindfulness Meditation ~ Shinzen Young

00:00:00 How does self-inquiry relate to mindfulness practice?

00:00:05 Someone wrote in asking, how does self-inquiry relate to mindfulness practice?

00:00:12 It's a really interesting question.

00:00:16 In a sense, it would seem like they're very, very different.

00:00:21 If you're not familiar with what's meant by self-inquiry, actually there's a range of

00:00:27 traditions that teach it, including Zen, some Zen teachers, but also many people working

00:00:34 within the Hindu tradition, the non-dual tradition, and so forth.

00:00:39 Basic idea is you're constantly asking a question like, who am I or what am I?

00:00:46 Whatever comes up, you're saying, well, who's experiencing this?

00:00:50 What's experiencing this?

00:00:51 You're having a thought, well, where did the thought come from?

00:00:55 Who's thinking this thought?

00:00:57 It's an approach that's been discovered independently in a number of cultures, used all around the

00:01:04 world, actually.

00:01:05 As I mentioned, there's some Zen teachers that teach it.

00:01:10 There's also within the Hindu fold, and then people not affiliated with either Hinduism

00:01:16 or Buddhism would give you a similar kind of model.

00:01:21 As I say, they all have the same basic idea, it's like turn consciousness back on itself,

00:01:28 turn the awareness back on itself.

00:01:31 That would seem to be a very different practice from mindfulness.

00:01:36 Mindfulness asks you to keep track of what's going on.

00:01:40 However, if you really look deeply into what mindfulness practice is about, you will see

00:01:49 that there's an interesting symmetry between self-inquiry on one hand and mindfulness on

00:01:58 the other hand.

00:02:03 It is true that the initial experiences that a person has when they do mindfulness can

00:02:09 be described as, I'm a meditator over here observing stuff over there.

00:02:17 However, with time, two very significant things take place.

00:02:25 One is that the habit of meditating begins to meditate.

00:02:32 In other words, there's not so much that sense of, there has to be an I here doing the meditation.

00:02:40 There's a momentum of concentration, sensory clarity, and equanimity, those three things.

00:02:47 A momentum of that builds up and it just carries itself.

00:02:51 One important change that takes place with time, with mindfulness practice, is that sense

00:02:58 of efforting and thinking that you initially needed in order to observe things, that goes

00:03:06 away and there is just the observing.

00:03:10 Just the clarity, well, if you want to call it observing, there's just the concentration,

00:03:15 clarity, and equanimity.

00:03:16 That's one change.

00:03:18 A second change is that you develop a sensitivity to what's called impermanence.

00:03:26 Now sometimes impermanence can be sort of continuous or vibratory or wavy, but another

00:03:33 aspect of impermanence is noting the moment when things vanish.

00:03:39 If you read the classic Visuddhimagga, for example, the path of purification written

00:03:44 in probably the 5th century in Sri Lanka by Buddhakosa, he talks about a stage where your

00:03:51 awareness is dominated by rising and passing, and then a stage where your awareness is dominated

00:03:57 by just passing.

00:03:59 You're just aware of endings, endings, endings.

00:04:03 In my vocabulary, I have people note it as ko.

00:04:08 It's nothing mystical shmistical.

00:04:10 You've all experienced it.

00:04:11 You pay attention to your internal conversation as soon as you notice the talk arises, it

00:04:15 sort of vanishes.

00:04:17 Mental images disappear.

00:04:18 Sounds come to an end.

00:04:19 It's no big deal.

00:04:21 Something everybody experiences, but you can reach a point in your practice where that

00:04:26 you become really, really aware of how many vanishings there are in things that you thought

00:04:33 were quite solid.

00:04:35 So at some point, you're just noting gone, gone, gone, gone.

00:04:39 The place, each time you're noting a vanishing, for just a moment, your attention is adverted,

00:04:46 that is to say, turned towards the source of consciousness.

00:04:52 Because where something goes to when it vanishes is where it comes from when it arises.

00:05:01 So if you want to turn the attention towards the source, you can take one of two strategies.

00:05:11 You can say, A has arisen.

00:05:15 Now let's look back and see where A came from.

00:05:19 That's one way to go about it.

00:05:21 That would be the self-inquiry way.

00:05:24 And it's very powerful.

00:05:26 It works very well for some people.

00:05:29 But it doesn't necessarily work well for everyone.

00:05:33 Another way to go about it is, well, instead of saying, A is arising, where did A come

00:05:41 from, constantly asking that.

00:05:43 Another way to go about it is, A has arisen.

00:05:48 Now A disappears.

00:05:50 Watch A disappear.

00:05:53 And that spot is going to be where B arises from.

00:05:57 So you watch the vanishing piece.

00:06:00 And if you want to be present at the very instant of the arising of B, you can do that

00:06:08 by noticing the vanishing of A, the thing that preceded it.

00:06:12 That's the gone of A is the origin of B. A and B meaning any two successive sensory

00:06:20 experiences, big or small.

00:06:22 That's what I meant when I said that there's a kind of symmetry between the two ways of
00:06:28 working.

00:06:29 So within the mindfulness tradition, there is actually something that more or less corresponds
00:06:35 to self-inquiry.

00:06:37 And it's hugely, hugely important.

00:06:40 But it's not done with the model of keep looking back, keep looking back at where things are
00:06:46 coming from.

00:06:47 It's done with the model of keep watching where they go to when they pass away.

00:06:52 Same place though.