

Born Between Expansion and Contraction: Responding to the Needs of Your Larger Identity ~ Shinzen

00:00:00 In the Visuddhimagga, which is the classic text on vipassana practice used in many of
00:00:21 the Southeast Asian countries, the path, the stages to enlightenment are enumerated as
00:00:30 seven, referred to as the satta visuddhaya, or seven purifications.
00:00:41 Now this is only one of many, many possible formulations of the path, and I think it's
00:00:49 useful to study these things, but it's also extremely dangerous to study these things
00:00:55 because then we get an idea that, well, it has to conform exactly to what's in this book
00:01:02 or in that book.
00:01:03 Then we get caught in studying the maps and not making the journey, or we're still spending
00:01:13 our time arguing with people about what the right map is.
00:01:19 However, having said that, there's also things we can learn that can give us a heads up,
00:01:28 that can be useful.
00:01:31 Rather close to stream entry, which is where it culminates in enlightenment, initial enlightenment,
00:01:41 one of the stages rather close to that is called an awareness of udayabhaya.
00:01:47 That means rising, passing.
00:01:53 That is followed by an awareness not of it rises, then it passes, but rather an awareness
00:02:06 it is passing as it is arising.
00:02:10 It's very clearly stated.
00:02:12 That's a stage different from awareness of rising and passing, and one of greater sensitivity
00:02:21 or awareness.
00:02:29 There are things that people are typically aware of and things that people are typically
00:02:36 not aware of.
00:02:40 People are typically drawn to the moment of arising and typically miss the moment of passing.
00:02:50 It's a very deep training to learn how to detect the moment of passing.
00:02:56 As you develop a sensitivity to that, you get to this experience that Buddhaghosa, the
00:03:04 author of the Visuddhimagga, was referring to, whereby as soon as any event is arising,
00:03:12 you detect within it, it's passing.
00:03:20 To paraphrase T.S.
00:03:21 Eliot, in my beginning is my end.
00:03:27 It's like no sooner has it begun, but it's palpably ending, not theoretical.
00:03:34 The ending is absolutely as salient.
00:03:38 The passing as it's arising is as salient as the arising.
00:03:46 That seems to have something to do with the timing of sensory processing in the brain.
00:03:57 Quite what it has to do with that, I'm not sure.
00:04:01 But to me, I would conjecture that since there's nothing really mystical about that notion,
00:04:11 that might be a good place to begin an investigation, a scientific investigation of enlightenment,
00:04:19 since awareness of passing as soon as it's arising is so near to enlightenment in that

00:04:26 formulation.

00:04:32 What's interesting is that the temporal metaphor of it's passing as soon as it's rising leads

00:04:40 to a spatial metaphor.

00:04:43 Because remember, every sensory experience, as I like to look at sensory experience, every

00:04:49 sensory experience has spatial volume.

00:04:52 It has width, depth, and height.

00:04:56 Perhaps not well defined, but even mental events, you have images, they occupy space.

00:05:06 You have talk, it's sort of in your head.

00:05:10 You can listen on the right, you can listen on the left, you can zoom out and see how

00:05:14 far the talk goes and discover that, hey, it's like bigger than your head.

00:05:19 It has spatial qualities.

00:05:23 So that means when something is arising, it's space is growing.

00:05:30 Now if something is also passing as it's arising, then it's space is collapsing at the same

00:05:37 time.

00:05:39 And I know it's pretty subtle, but it's detectable.

00:05:43 And that gives you a perception of what Sasaki Roshi calls father and mother pulling apart

00:05:54 and giving birth to the present.

00:05:57 So temporally, if we take the model of the Visuddhimagga, I give you the heads up, there

00:06:05 may come a time in your practice where as soon as things are arising, they're passing,

00:06:10 and that's not a concept.

00:06:12 It's salient.

00:06:15 Heads up, that's a temporal perception, but since all experience is spatial, that means

00:06:24 as soon as space is being born, it's also collapsing.

00:06:28 So it's spreading out and pulling in at exactly the same time.

00:06:36 And that would be true with regards to any sensory experience.

00:06:43 So specifically, feel, image, talk individually, and then collectively, all three at once,

00:07:01 born in between this flow of space.

00:07:08 Then you remember the koan that Sasaki Roshi frequently gives when you see the flower,

00:07:15 how do you experience your true self?

00:07:18 So let's say that you've been habitually paying attention to how feel, image, talk arise subtly,

00:07:32 all three at once, and they arise in this expanding, contracting force field.

00:07:39 So that's now becomes, you've got a momentum of that, that sort of second nature.

00:07:44 So when you look at an object that's external sight, well guess what?

00:07:48 It does exactly the same thing.

00:07:52 Each little shift in the external visual is an arising and a passing.

00:07:59 That means a spreading and a collapsing.

00:08:01 That means since each little part is that way, the whole experience is that way.

00:08:06 Then your three fountains, and I don't mean linear fountains that go up and down, gushing

00:08:17 and gathering, I mean in all six directions.

00:08:23 It's like fountains that gush and gather in all the directions of space.

00:08:29 The self is arising in that as feel, image, talk, and each thing you look at has exactly

00:08:39 the same flow of space.

00:08:42 And those two waves, the simultaneous expansion and contraction in fit, and the simultaneous
00:08:49 expansion and contraction in it, it meaning any touch, sight, or sound, they cannot be
00:09:01 held apart.
00:09:03 They simply cannot be held apart.
00:09:07 They automatically become a single expansion and contraction, and there is an absolute
00:09:19 union and the separation between subject and object, inside and outside, are annihilated
00:09:30 for a moment.
00:09:31 And there is only the activity of the source.
00:09:36 That activity, so one theme, temporarily passing as soon as it's arising.
00:09:44 Spatially collapsing as soon as it's spreading.
00:09:50 Exact same thing.
00:09:52 Now one other theme.
00:09:57 There is a kind of absolute spontaneous effortlessness to the way space spreads and collapses.
00:10:07 So at the very arising, as soon as an experience occurs, begins to occur, there's a kind of
00:10:21 effortless refreshing spontaneity, a kind of just happening-ness to it.
00:10:27 These themes of spatiality and spontaneity are hugely emphasized in the Dzogchen tradition
00:10:36 of Tibetan practice.
00:10:38 They're linked.
00:10:43 So that there is a kind of refreshing dynamic taste of effortlessness that is present inside
00:11:00 the spaciousness.
00:11:03 Problem with the word spacious, though, is it implies, oh, there's this giant space that's
00:11:08 always there.
00:11:10 That's why it's spacious.
00:11:11 But spaciousness means has the nature, the elastic nature of space to be able to spread
00:11:18 and collapse at the same time.
00:11:20 So the spreading and collapsing is, it's sort of effortless.
00:11:26 And you can get a sense that you're just riding on it.
00:11:29 In Zen they call that riding the ox backwards.
00:11:33 Because you don't know where you're going, but you don't have to know where you're going.
00:11:37 You're mounted on the ox of the source.
00:11:44 This could be described as literally praying continuously.
00:11:53 With each sensory event, there is a tangible contact with the source.
00:12:03 What determines the life of a star?
00:12:09 What's the big picture as to how a star lives?
00:12:13 Well, there are two forces that dominate the physics of a star.
00:12:24 A contractive force of gravitation, which is universal.
00:12:33 But then what happens, so that gathers hydrogen and other, I guess basically hydrogen, maybe
00:12:41 a little helium.
00:12:42 Let's say it's a primary star, so it gathers hydrogen.
00:12:50 But what happens when you compress a gas?
00:12:55 Well I mean a lot of things happen, but what's the main thing that happens that you first
00:12:59 think of?

00:13:01 It heats up.

00:13:03 But what happens when things heat up?

00:13:06 They expand.

00:13:08 So there's a thermophoton pressure that is constantly pushing out against the gravitational

00:13:17 force that's constantly pulling in.

00:13:21 So it's a contest between expanding space and contracting space.

00:13:27 The star goes in cycles, where one dominates, the other dominates.

00:13:35 So if a star had sensory experience and were to report on its sensory experience, it would

00:13:45 say I am born in between expansion and contraction.

00:13:50 That's what it would say if it could say anything.

00:13:54 So a star might say that.

00:13:57 And isn't it interesting that at each expansive contractive cycle, there's a nurturing process.

00:14:08 What gets nurtured, what gets given birth to, are the heavier and heavier atoms.

00:14:13 How did we get from hydrogen to all the other atoms, including the silicon and the oxygen

00:14:25 and nitrogen and carbon that we need for planets and life and so forth?

00:14:33 Where did that come from?

00:14:34 It was cooked inside stars, primary stars.

00:14:39 And if the stars were big enough, at the end of their life, they experienced total simultaneous

00:14:48 expansion and contraction.

00:14:52 So intense that a part of the star collapses either to a neutron star or a black hole,

00:15:03 and the other part accelerates at unbelievable velocities out into the universe and showers

00:15:14 all the universe with those heavy atoms, which then can recoagulate in secondary stars like

00:15:22 our sun that can then have planets around them.

00:15:26 Because of the heavier elements, there's carbon, oxygen, life can arise.

00:15:31 So we are literally made of stardust, quite literally.

00:15:38 The carbon, the oxygen, the nitrogen, the atoms of life, everything but hydrogen is

00:15:46 born in between.

00:15:51 How about galaxies?

00:15:53 Well, it's now believed that galaxies are a giant cloud of stars, and in the center

00:16:05 of them is a supermassive black hole.

00:16:09 So there's a contractive core and an effusive cloud.

00:16:14 How about an atom?

00:16:17 Same deal.

00:16:19 Really massive nucleus, contractive core, effusive cloud of electrons around.

00:16:27 So if you ask a galaxy, who gave birth to you?

00:16:35 If it could speak, it would say, I'm born in between expansion and contraction.

00:16:39 So what an atom?

00:16:42 As small as an atom may seem, it's gargantuan relative to the Planck scale of length.

00:16:55 When you get down, and then of course there's the ultimately large, there's the size of

00:16:59 the observable universe.

00:17:04 Major theme, okay?

00:17:06 What's the holy grail of modern physics is to somehow unify the theory of gravity, which

00:17:16 deals with the largest conceivable structure, with the theory of quantum physics, quantum
00:17:26 field theory and so forth, which deals with what happens when you look at very small parts.
00:17:33 There's no theory at this point that is unified, no unified field theory.
00:17:40 So I find it intriguing that the edge of physics is somehow related to this issue of small
00:17:52 and large.
00:17:55 What's the fate of the universe?
00:17:57 Well no one knows.
00:17:59 But people, a common conjecture is that it will depend on something called the cosmological
00:18:10 constant.
00:18:13 And would you believe it?
00:18:15 The cosmological constant is actually a ratio of two physical quantities.
00:18:23 And what do you suppose?
00:18:25 One of those quantities expands the universe, and the other, what do you think, contracts.
00:18:35 And no one knows what that ratio is.
00:18:38 It seems to all involve these weird flavors of interplay of expansive and contractive
00:18:45 things and somehow what's born in between will be either virtual particles that come
00:18:54 out of nothing in the quantum soup of the ultimately small or seemingly the universe
00:19:01 itself.
00:19:04 Now I may just be projecting this, you know, based on my own experiences and points of
00:19:11 view.
00:19:16 In which case fine.
00:19:18 And there's no great cosmic meaning to this paradigm of enlightenment that I'd like to
00:19:26 share with you.
00:19:29 But maybe it's not a coincidence.
00:19:37 Let's put it this way.
00:19:38 Whether this born in betweenness that we can experience in deep mindful states, whether
00:19:51 that's related to these larger sort of principles of nature or not, in a sense it's irrelevant
00:20:00 because we're doing this practice not in order to validate science or to have science validate
00:20:09 us.
00:20:11 We're doing this practice so that we can be happy in the deepest and broadest sense of
00:20:18 the word.
00:20:19 So it's pragmatic, not theoretical, why we do this practice.
00:20:26 But if in some way it relates to deep theory, well, I think that's sort of cool also.
00:20:35 Our source, the source of moment by moment experience in my nervous system, is the same
00:20:47 flow of nature that is the source of moment by moment experience in everybody's nervous
00:20:57 system.
00:20:58 Therefore, if you on a regular basis experience life this way, you're constantly having an
00:21:10 experience of the oneness of inside and outside.
00:21:17 Therefore you naturally, spontaneously, in a sense whether you want to or not, cannot
00:21:29 help but respond, respond to the needs of your larger identity.
00:21:42 So to meditate and to give to others the fruits of meditation.
00:21:49 How do you give to others the fruits of meditation?

00:21:53 Well you teach them.

00:22:00 How do you teach them?

00:22:03 Well you teach them at a subtle level by the unconditional positive regard that channels

00:22:14 through your affect because you're seeing them as you.

00:22:21 So there's just a good vibe that comes out that people feel happy and in safety just

00:22:32 by being in your presence.

00:22:35 That's a subtle level of teaching.

00:22:39 Another subtle level of teaching is people that know you and see you change for the better

00:22:46 over the months, years, and decades.

00:22:50 That's a very powerful sermon.

00:22:54 You teach by describing what you do when you meditate.

00:23:05 People say, hey, we went to a meditation retreat.

00:23:07 What did you do?

00:23:10 You're not going to instruct them in meditation.

00:23:12 You're not even going to necessarily encourage them to meditate.

00:23:16 But if you can give a coherent description of the meditative endeavor, a coherent description

00:23:26 is a cogent description.

00:23:29 Coherent means what you say is your words are well defined and they make sense logically

00:23:40 and they're reasonable given evidence.

00:23:46 So you give just a coherent description of what you do.

00:23:51 Or put alternatively, you give a non-blabbering muddled description of what you do.

00:24:02 You'd be amazed how easy it is to blabber and be incoherent when people ask you what

00:24:14 you do in meditation.

00:24:16 It's hard to explain.

00:24:19 It's intuitive.

00:24:21 It's like a finger pointing to a hazy moon.

00:24:29 That may be Zen poetry, but I don't call that a coherent description.

00:24:33 The Buddha said that the Dhamma is sanditiko.

00:24:36 It means crystal clear and ehipassiko of the nature of try it for yourself and you'll see.

00:24:46 Anybody can see it.

00:24:48 So if you give just a coherent description in 30 seconds, well, we did this, we did this,

00:24:56 we did this, that's a powerful teaching.

00:25:01 So you should at least be able to describe in a way that a normal human being can get

00:25:08 some sense of what you're talking about coherently what you do.

00:25:12 The simplest coherent description that I have found just about anyone can understand, any

00:25:19 adult can understand is, well, you know how in daily life sometimes you're more focused,

00:25:28 sometimes you're less focused, have you noticed that?

00:25:31 Most people say yes.

00:25:32 Well, did you ever notice that in the times when you're more focused, you're more effective

00:25:37 and you feel better, and then when you're less focused, you know, less, yeah, most people,

00:25:43 they've experienced that.

00:25:47 And then you say something like, well, you know how if you like systematically develop

00:25:52 a skill, you get better and better at it?

00:25:54 Most people have developed a skill.

00:25:57 Well, meditation is like that.

00:25:59 We do systematic practice that develops a skill that increases our baseline of concentration

00:26:06 in daily life so we have more experiences naturally of being focused and therefore we're

00:26:14 more effective and more fulfilled.

00:26:17 Most people can follow the logic of that.

00:26:20 So that's a coherent description that takes 30 seconds or a minute.

00:26:25 When you are a teacher, you have taught at the descriptive level.

00:26:31 Then there's teaching at the, what might be described as the prescriptive level.

00:26:42 You prescribe.

00:26:43 In other words, you say, okay, I'm going to teach you this technique, do it this way,

00:26:49 report back to me.

00:26:52 In other words, you're explicitly teaching meditation.

00:26:56 You're a meditation facilitator or a teacher.

00:27:00 That's sort of the explicit level.

00:27:03 So the way that, so a consequence of continuous contact with the source is that you realize

00:27:18 you share the source with everyone you want to serve.

00:27:22 You can serve in the ordinary sense of helping people's conditional happiness.

00:27:31 That's good.

00:27:33 You can also serve in the extraordinary sense of teaching.

00:27:39 You can teach by your affect.

00:27:42 You can teach by your behavior changes.

00:27:47 You can teach by just describing how meditation works.

00:27:52 And some of you, probably many of you, will want to move on to the explicit level of teaching

00:27:59 at some point.

00:28:04 And that's as good as it gets.