

Kriyas & Complete Experiences ~ Shinzen Young

00:00:00 What is Kriya?
00:00:04 There's a phenomenon that comes up in meditation
00:00:08 that I frequently get asked about,
00:00:11 which we call technically kriyas.
00:00:16 Kriya is a word in the Sanskrit language
00:00:20 that could perhaps literally be translated as
00:00:25 a cleansing action.
00:00:28 It comes from the Sanskrit root kr,
00:00:32 which means to do.
00:00:33 It's actually the same root as the word karma.
00:00:37 Kriya literally means an action,
00:00:39 but it has a connotation of an action
00:00:43 that would cleanse one or release something,
00:00:46 release toxins.
00:00:48 For example, in yoga,
00:00:50 there are certain cleansing procedures
00:00:54 that might be referred to as kriya.
00:00:57 But as a phenomenon that comes up in meditation,
00:01:02 it refers to spontaneous movements,
00:01:07 movements that just sort of happen to you,
00:01:10 that come out of nowhere.
00:01:11 Sometimes they're sort of small movements,
00:01:14 the little shaking of the body, this kind of thing,
00:01:17 but it can get dramatic,
00:01:20 turn into this kind of thing,
00:01:22 or in the most dramatic cases,
00:01:25 it can involve weird grimacing and sounds.
00:01:31 I've even had people in the most extreme cases
00:01:34 sort of howling like animals
00:01:37 and having animal faces and things.
00:01:40 You can sort of imagine where ideas of werewolfism,
00:01:46 lycanthropy and so forth,
00:01:48 might come about if people saw
00:01:51 this kind of thing going on.
00:01:53 Now, don't worry, that's the most extreme cases.
00:01:57 Usually it's just a sort of rocking, shaking,

00:01:59 that kind of thing.

00:02:01 So we call these spontaneous movements kriyas, typically.

00:02:07 By we I mean the meditation teachers of the world

00:02:10 that have some background in Indic systems.

00:02:15 Now the fact that there is a technical term from India

00:02:21 that refers to this phenomenon tells you

00:02:24 it's not an uncommon phenomenon

00:02:27 and also hints that there may be an underlying theory

00:02:32 and notions about what the best way to work with it is

00:02:36 and so forth.

00:02:38 When people come to me with kriyas,

00:02:41 they usually have a few basic questions.

00:02:45 The first is, am I going to lose my marbles?

00:02:48 Am I going to become weird?

00:02:50 Am I going to go insane?

00:02:54 Is this safe, what's happening?

00:02:58 So I typically say, nothing to worry about,

00:03:00 not an uncommon phenomenon.

00:03:03 You're not going crazy.

00:03:05 We've got a word for it.

00:03:07 You're not the first person to experience this.

00:03:11 So I sort of reassure them that it's part of the path sometimes.

00:03:16 The problem with the kriyas is,

00:03:20 or the problem, let's say, with talking about the kriyas,

00:03:22 like I am now,

00:03:24 is that it's a little bit of a lose-lose situation.

00:03:29 If I don't talk about it, people don't know about it

00:03:33 and what to do about it.

00:03:35 But if I do talk about it, people either are afraid,

00:03:38 oh my God, what would I do if that happened to me?

00:03:42 Or they develop cravings.

00:03:44 If that hasn't happened to me yet, what's wrong with my meditation?

00:03:47 So the most important thing is not to develop cravings or aversions.

00:03:51 Some people experience this, some people don't.

00:03:56 It's not a barrier to progress,

00:03:59 neither is it a sine qua non for progress.

00:04:02 It just happens to some people.

00:04:04 Next thing they usually want to know is,

00:04:06 well, should I try to suppress those movements

00:04:09 or should I go with them?

00:04:11 My advice is typically try both.

00:04:14 You can learn from both of those situations.

00:04:18 You can learn from trying to not allow it to happen,
00:04:21 and you can learn by just, OK, give it permission to happen.
00:04:26 Then the next logical question is, well, why is it happening?
00:04:30 What does it mean?
00:04:33 Here I like to use a model that's derived from the U Ba Khin lineage
00:04:39 of Burmese Vipassana.
00:04:42 In their way of thinking about this phenomenon,
00:04:46 there is the deep mind, the subconscious mind,
00:04:51 which is called the aggregate of sankharas,
00:04:54 that's in Sanskrit, or in the Pali language they're called sankhara.
00:04:59 These are the forces that are the habit forces within a human being.
00:05:07 They can be positive or negative,
00:05:09 although there's a certain connotation that being at the mercy
00:05:12 of any unconscious force is in some ways a negative,
00:05:17 even if it's a good habit,
00:05:19 because it's a groove that drives one's perceptions and behaviors.
00:05:24 The model that they use is that the meditation purifies consciousness
00:05:29 by breaking up these sankharas,
00:05:32 by smoothing out the channels that constrain our behavior, these grooves.
00:05:42 So when a groove starts to break up,
00:05:46 it may initially percolate up to the surface as a sensation in the body,
00:05:53 perhaps a very subtle sensation in the body.
00:05:56 The idea is that when you have body sensations
00:06:01 and you have a complete experience of the body sensation,
00:06:04 meaning that you experience a body sensation
00:06:07 in a concentrated, sensorially clear, and equanimous state,
00:06:13 or put alternatively,
00:06:15 when you have a mindful experience of a body sensation,
00:06:19 physical or emotional,
00:06:21 it won't impart any grooves into the unconscious.
00:06:27 But if you don't have a mindful experience of pleasant and unpleasant
sensations,
00:06:32 then they will impart grooves into the unconscious.
00:06:37 And since we have thousands and thousands of sensations every day,
00:06:41 big and small,
00:06:42 and since most people don't have a very high level of baseline mindful
awareness,
00:06:49 those sensations are constantly imparting grooves, sankharas.
00:06:55 Well, as we meditate, those grooves start to break up.
00:07:00 And when they break up, they sort of reverse the process.
00:07:05 They were imparted by sensations in the past.
00:07:08 Now they start to come up as sensations in the present.

00:07:12 But before they come all the way up to surface,
00:07:15 where they can be observed and completed in the present,
00:07:20 and therefore their influence from the past wiped out,
00:07:24 before that happens,
00:07:26 they may hit a kind of vulnerable area in the semi-conscious part of the
body
00:07:32 and cause the body to move spontaneously.
00:07:37 So that's a model for why it's a purification process.
00:07:43 What to do to optimize the purification?
00:07:47 Well, if you can detect the sensations that underlie the urge of the body to
move,
00:07:56 if you can detect them, you can have a complete experience of them,
00:08:00 and you'll discover that the body won't be driven to move.
00:08:03 One of the reasons to explore not moving
00:08:07 is that that may make it easier to detect the underlying sensations as
they're coming up.
00:08:14 However, it is by no means the case that you can always detect
00:08:19 those subtle sensations that are driving the Kriya movement.
00:08:23 In that case, it's okay.
00:08:26 Just have a complete experience of the Kriya itself,
00:08:31 the more surface sensation of the body moving and so forth.
00:08:35 That's the best you can do at that time, and that's fine.
00:08:41 So that's the basic model for why these things happen and what to do about
them.