

When Sensory Experience Loses Its 'Something-ness' ~ Shinzen Young

00:00:00 In early Buddhism, there's a big emphasis on the notion of what's called Udayabhaya
00:00:20 in practice. So, aya means to go, ut is up, and vi is away. So, udaya is arising, something
00:00:38 udaya, rises up, and then vyaya is passing. So, you've probably heard of arising and passing
00:00:51 as a stage that people go through in their practice where the perception is dominated
00:01:05 by a sense of coming and going. So, when you begin your practice, you're just all over
00:01:17 the map. Remember that? Sometimes it's still like that for me too. You're just all over
00:01:26 the map. We'll talk a little bit more about all over the map a little later. But you're
00:01:36 all over the map and you can't concentrate and you long for the ability to concentrate
00:01:43 and some sort of tranquility and ease. And then you actually start to experience more
00:01:53 tranquility and ease and your focus improves. And then things get sort of interesting because
00:02:03 now you have like a little secret thing that you can do anytime you want. You can taste
00:02:09 samadhi, samadhi rasa, the taste of being in a concentrated state becomes available
00:02:18 to you not only during formal practice, but also as you're sort of bopping around in the
00:02:28 world. So, that's really nice. And I can remember when that started to come on for me. And it's
00:02:35 like, wow, I got this secret thing that I can do now anytime in the day. So, it's like
00:02:43 I'll never waste any time again. Either what I'm doing is intrinsically meaningful for
00:02:51 me or I'm forced to do something that's meaningless like wait in line or be uncomfortable like
00:03:01 I'm sick or something. And those times that would have been like really crappy at best
00:03:11 but now may be uncomfortable. Now these are my secret times because I can use them to
00:03:18 cultivate and deepen this taste of concentration. So, that's a nice stage and really starts
00:03:27 to change the way that you think about things. Like Don Juan in the Carlos Castaneda book
00:03:34 said, most people think of the day in terms of fortune and misfortune, but a person who
00:03:42 is on a path to being able to see, S-E-E, thinks of the day in terms of a sequence of
00:03:49 challenges. So, I can remember this really nice stage when the day became just a sequence
00:03:58 of okay, can I do this and still taste a little bit of concentration? Can I do this more complex,
00:04:04 complicated thing and still taste a little bit of concentration? So, that's nice. Then
00:04:12 you're able to use that concentration if you're doing a sort of deconstructive, classic mindfulness
00:04:19 approach to things. You're able to untangle the strands of self. Now in early Buddhism,
00:04:29 the self is analysed into components in a number of different ways, but the five aggregates,
00:04:37 you can look it up on Wikipedia if you want, the five skandhas, are sort of the classic
00:04:43 deconstruction of the somethingness of selfhood. The idea is, okay, if you can untangle and
00:04:52 unblock these, then you will see that there is no thing inside you called a self. So,
00:05:03 in my case, I have applied Occam's razor, which says, well, do things as simply as you
00:05:10 can. What I've found is that you just need three elements to get a core sense of I am-ness,
00:05:20 mental image, mental talk, and body emotion as a system. Sure enough, if you are able
00:05:28 to untangle those, you start to get some liberation from the sense of self as a separate, suffering,

00:05:39 limited entity. So, that's nice. You bring sensory clarity now to the picture and you're
00:05:47 sort of untangling. That's quite liberating, but then at an even deeper level, things simplify
00:05:58 further. You get a sense that everything is just arising and passing, arising and passing.
00:06:11 That's true for your inner sense of self, but it's also true even for the sight, sounds,
00:06:18 and physical touches that would constitute the perception of an external world. In fact,
00:06:25 the distinction between inside and outside breaks down when you're in a situation of
00:06:33 arising and passing. So, everything gets really, really simplified. There's just this constant
00:06:40 rhythm of things rising up, things passing away, rising up, passing away. As that is
00:06:55 happening, you get a sense that each of these arising and passing moments is accompanied
00:07:11 by a taste of purification. This is really hard to put into words. So, as it's arising,
00:07:24 it's sort of like vibrating and arising. You get the sense that the somethingness of that
00:07:37 experience is sort of dissipating. In fact, sometimes I get... Now, this is just a mental
00:07:44 image, right? It's just what I'm about to describe is just a representation that happens
00:07:52 in my image space. You might not have this same representation, but just to share, I
00:07:59 get this sense that each inner or outer, see, hear, feel, big or small, whatever it is,
00:08:06 it's sort of like this bubble that rises up and then passes away, arising, passing. It's
00:08:12 vibrating as it's arising, and it's vibrating as it's passing. I get in image space this
00:08:18 image of like this black smoke is coming out of it and sort of like dissipating in all
00:08:27 directions. That black smoke is the somethingness of that sensory event. The somethingness of
00:08:39 it is being released and freeing up the pure doingness of it. It actually is becoming transparent,
00:08:52 like you can see through it. The color of the modalities, visual, auditory, somatic,
00:09:01 or the color of pleasant versus unpleasant, or mind versus body, any sort of quality that
00:09:14 would, quote, color that experience is like being dissipated as this sort of... The black
00:09:24 smoke would sort of represent the opacity or the thingness of that experience, and it's
00:09:32 like dissipating. Now, once again, this is just an image, a representation in my image
00:09:38 space of a taste of something. What it's the taste of is that sensory experience is becoming
00:09:48 transparent. It's losing its somethingness. Actually, there's what they call the three
00:10:05 vimokshas. This is a technical term. You can look it up. It's sort of interesting. It's
00:10:13 not a commonly used set of categories in Buddhism, but it is traditional. They're called vimoksha
00:10:22 dvāra, the three gates of liberation that you go through to get free from the somethingness
00:10:32 of self and world, the coagulation of self and world into a suffering thing. There are
00:10:44 these three vimoksha dvāras, or gates of liberation. That's why temples in Japan, Buddhist temples,
00:10:57 they're called vimokshas. The first thing you encounter when you approach is like a
00:11:04 three gate situation, and it's supposed to remind you of these three gates of liberation.
00:11:10 Anyway, one of the gates of liberation is emptiness, shunyata. Another one is animitta,
00:11:23 which means without somethingness or without, no, a better translation, without essence,
00:11:31 essenceless. Now, essenceless sounds sort of bad, but it means without any limiting
00:11:40 quality. Then the last one is very interesting, apranidhana, which means effortlessness. Everything
00:11:53 in the world is vacuous, essenceless, and just occurs spontaneously. Now, I know those
00:12:08 words don't sound very appealing, but actually it's just bliss city when you start to have
00:12:17 these experiences. So I can actually sort of get the sense that the essence or the thingness
00:12:31 is dissipating, and the experience is almost like it's becoming transparent. Self and world

00:12:41 are becoming transparent. And sure enough, also there is a kind of delicious spontaneity
00:12:54 or effortless, will-less, just happeningness in the arisings and passings. So that's the
00:13:03 three gates of liberation that you pass through the vimoksha dvara to realize nirvana. So
00:13:17 all of this that I'm describing is a consequence of clarity and equanimity. So everything simplifies
00:13:30 to this theme of arising and passing, arising and passing. And even if you're going through
00:13:36 something excruciating in the body, even if you're going through something confusing in
00:13:41 the mind, the flavor of excruciation or the flavor of confusion are sort of like being
00:13:50 dissipated and they're being replaced by this one flavor, this ekarasa, which is the taste
00:13:59 of freedom. So this is sort of the classic description of A&P, some Western teachers
00:14:14 call it A&P, like my friend Kenneth Folk, arising and passing. It's an important stage.
00:14:22 Now the way I like to approach things is that if you do enough practice, this experience
00:14:38 that I'm describing becomes available anytime you want. It's not like something that's rare,
00:14:47 happens occasionally, or it's like a special thing that happens on a retreat. You want
00:14:53 to move in the direction that any time during the day you can just go into what I just described.
00:15:05 And for some people that comes on more quickly in their practice, for some people it takes
00:15:11 a little bit longer. But we're in this for the long haul. You know, my stock phrase,
00:15:19 I'm not going to promise you something that is necessarily a quick fix, but I do promise
00:15:30 you a deep fix. But we're engaged in a householder's practice here, we're not locked in a cave
00:15:40 in Tibet or in the forest of Southeast Asia or doing like samurai bootcamp training in
00:15:49 Japan in a Zen temple. We're bopping around living North American lives. And so we sort
00:15:56 of have to amortize our ego death over long periods of time. You could think of it as
00:16:03 a kinder, gentler form of ego death, as opposed to say Zen, where, oh my God, some of you
00:16:13 know, basically they just pull the rug out from under you. It's impossible to get comfortable
00:16:20 and it's simply impossible. The day is just a sequence of physical, mental, and conceptual
00:16:31 assaults on your being. Kurushimi no renzoku is one way I've heard it described, an endless
00:16:45 sequence of miseries. Some of you speak Japanese. Kurushimi no renzoku. At the beginning, that's
00:16:54 what it is. So what are you going to do? Well, you either leave or you're driven into the
00:17:09 only place of relief, which is this arising, passing thing. And yes, that can happen fairly
00:17:19 quickly under those severe monastic training situations. But we're not in that. We've made
00:17:25 a different choice. We want the kinder, gentler version. So, okay, fine. I'm not saying that
00:17:32 what I just described to you will necessarily happen in the first year, even the first five
00:17:37 years of your practice, but time will happen. Time will pass. And you might be saying, yeah,
00:17:45 but I'm old, so I don't have a lot of time. Well, you know what I'm going to say with
00:17:49 respect to that? The aging process can be an ally to liberation. It's sort of a natural
00:18:04 pointing towards no self. So one way or another, we've got time.