

Using Turn Away and Background Equanimity w. Sensory Challenges ~ Shinzen Young

00:00:00 At some point, you realize that, you know what, no matter what I do, I'm still going
00:00:11 to be uncomfortable.

00:00:13 I can say that that will change with time, and it will change in two ways.

00:00:19 First, your body will acclimatize to the posture.

00:00:23 It'll just get used to it, your legs will stretch, your muscles get used to it and so

00:00:30 forth, and it won't be as uncomfortable as it is in your first retreat or several retreats.

00:00:38 So there is a change that takes place in the body.

00:00:43 More importantly, a change takes place in consciousness.

00:00:47 Your relationship to discomfort gets rewired, so that even when discomfort's there, it becomes
00:00:55 less problematic.

00:00:58 It will improve with time due to these two causes.

00:01:03 In general, when you deal with a challenge of any sort, the first thing you want to do

00:01:08 is ask yourself, what is the sensory challenge involved here?

00:01:13 So what's involved in the sensory challenge of physical discomfort in your body is certainly
00:01:19 the physical discomfort.

00:01:20 However, there may be a significant component of feel-image-talk-reaction to the discomfort,
00:01:31 in addition to the discomfort itself.

00:01:34 The physical discomfort has typically local intensities, but it also tends to have a global,
00:01:46 subtle spreading influence on your body, your whole body.

00:01:51 However, that global spreading influence may be below the threshold of awareness.

00:01:58 It may be subliminal, so you may not detect it.

00:02:01 If you don't detect it, then you don't work with it.

00:02:05 Basic principle in mindfulness practice, you only work with tangible sensory experience.

00:02:11 You don't sort of like, well, I know something's there.

00:02:15 What's wrong with me?

00:02:16 I can't get to it.

00:02:17 I can't detect it, and so forth.

00:02:20 I know there's this or that under there.

00:02:23 Why am I blocking it, et cetera, et cetera.

00:02:25 That's not the thought pattern that goes with mindfulness practice.

00:02:29 With mindfulness practice, it's whatever is available to the senses, that is what you

00:02:34 work on, and whatever may be below it, well, that gets worked on by a trickle-down effect.

00:02:42 Even though I say that there is often a global spread from the local intensities, it is also

00:02:49 often the case that that is not detectable.

00:02:52 If it's not detectable, don't worry about it.

00:02:55 Don't be concerned.

00:02:57 However, if you happen to notice that, that when you get a sort of local splash here,
00:03:04 there's a little something here, a little here, a little here, and those are touch,
00:03:08 they're physical reactions to the local intensity.
00:03:12 Well, then if it's come up to the surface of awareness, then that's something that can
00:03:17 be worked with.
00:03:19 Potentially, the sensory components of your physical discomfort are certainly an awareness
00:03:29 of various local intensities, perhaps an awareness of a more global spread.
00:03:35 This is all uncomfortable touch.
00:03:38 Then reactive to that, you may have mental pictures triggered by that.
00:03:43 You may have, and those could be pictures of the body part where the discomfort is,
00:03:49 or they could even, in the extreme case, be symbols that sort of represent what's going
00:03:56 on, or they may be pictures of the energy flows that are there.
00:04:00 I used to get images of knives stabbing, or hammers banging, or monsters biting, and things
00:04:10 like that.
00:04:11 Of course, I call that disconcerting imagery.
00:04:18 Then you get the talk, and the talk is like, oh my God, oh my God, or it's like, oh, this
00:04:23 sucks, or when's this going to go away?
00:04:29 I know Shinzen's asleep, the bell should be rung.
00:04:36 It doesn't bother him, he doesn't give a crap.
00:04:41 What about the rest of us?
00:04:44 The overall gestalt is local touch, perhaps an awareness of a global spread of the touch,
00:04:52 and perhaps some subtle or not so subtle arisings in field image talk.
00:04:59 These all come under the category of what I call ordinary sensory experiences.
00:05:06 You formulate a strategy for working with this.
00:05:11 One strategy is focus away from it, just ignore it all.
00:05:17 That is a valid strategy if you can do it.
00:05:20 Focus on what?
00:05:21 Restful states, if you can, positive field image talk, if you can.
00:05:29 I used to try focusing, and actually I do this with pain patients, focus on sights and
00:05:35 sounds that take you away from the body and the mind.
00:05:41 It is valid to do that as long as you realize that it's a mindfulness practice.
00:05:49 In other words, as I define it, mindfulness is a threefold attentional skill set, concentration,
00:05:57 clarity, equanimity.
00:05:59 Those don't all have to be directed towards the same sensory event.
00:06:04 You can direct your concentration and clarity towards, let's say, the sounds, while at the
00:06:11 same time having equanimity with the body-mind eruptions.
00:06:18 You're just not intentionally focusing on them.
00:06:20 You're still having a cocoon of equanimity with the sensory challenge, and sort of surrounding
00:06:25 the sensory challenge.
00:06:27 It's just you're deciding, I'm going to put my attention elsewhere.
00:06:31 Just putting the attention elsewhere can really help with the equanimity and give a chance
00:06:36 for the eruption to sort of cool down.

00:06:39 So it is not the case that that represents suppression or denial, the focus away strategy.

00:06:46 The way you know it's not suppression is that you are giving permission for that sensory

00:06:52 challenge to arise.

00:06:53 You're just not intentionally focusing on it.

00:06:56 Your clarity and concentration is being directed to something else, which could actually help

00:07:02 with the equanimity on that thing.

00:07:06 So it's not suppression because you're giving it permission to be there.

00:07:10 You don't have an agenda that somehow you're going to make it go away.

00:07:15 It's just you're selectively attending elsewhere.

00:07:18 That is number one.

00:07:19 And number two, on occasion, you're willing to turn towards it.

00:07:25 If at least on occasion you're willing to turn towards it, and when you turn away from

00:07:29 it, you equanimize it, but your concentration and clarity is simply directed elsewhere.

00:07:36 So you're still developing basic mindfulness skills by a focus away strategy.

00:07:41 If your focus away strategy is formulated that way, then you're not suppressing and

00:07:46 you're not denying.

00:07:48 Because on another occasion, you're going to turn towards it.

00:07:51 You're just developing the same basic mindfulness skill set in another way that is easier for

00:07:58 you or more attractive for you.

00:08:01 So it is OK to focus away from things if you have that very clear conceptual framework

00:08:09 that I just gave you.

00:08:11 You may or may not be able to focus away.

00:08:14 Sometimes I can do it.

00:08:15 I can just focus on restful states.

00:08:18 And I can keep with the restful states to near-fainting levels of pain.

00:08:23 And it really creates huge equanimity and huge purification flavors.

00:08:30 And I'm not focusing on the touch or the feel of the image.

00:08:35 Just wherever I can find rest, I'm just relaxing and whatever I can do.

00:08:42 Because pain can stimulate feel-image talk.

00:08:45 But pain can also turn off feel-image talk, creating peace, blank, quiet.

00:08:50 A lot of times when you're in physical pain, you don't want to relax the body.

00:08:54 Why?

00:08:55 Why don't you want to relax the body when you're in physical pain?

00:09:00 Because if you relax the body, it's likely you'll become aware of the spread that I'm

00:09:08 talking about.

00:09:09 The muscle tension in the body covers over that spread.

00:09:14 But actually, it's pennywise and pound foolish.

00:09:16 Because if you relax the body, then yes, now the uncomfortable touch is going to subtly

00:09:22 take over your body.

00:09:24 When you give it permission to spread volumetrically like that, the pressure dissipates from the

00:09:28 local intensity.

00:09:30 Once you discover that, then you're willing to relax the body and let it spread.

00:09:38 So sometimes I just focus on restful states and let the pain drive me into deeper and

00:09:43 deeper states of relaxation, peace, blank, quiet.

00:09:46 So if you can do that, great.

00:09:50 But you may not be able to do that.

00:09:52 In that case, no problem.

00:09:55 Alternate strategy, turn towards it.