

How Would You Describe Enlightenment? ~ Shinzen Young answers

00:00:00 Someone asked me an interesting question in one of the onlines about no self and it sort

00:00:20 of got me talking and thinking about the topic. There is a sometimes say that the Buddhists

00:00:33 are their own worst PR people. I mean that the words that are used to try to sell Buddhism

00:00:42 suffering, impermanence, emptiness, no self or even more inscrutable and off-putting no

00:00:59 soul which is sometimes the translation. Of course there are very very good reasons why

00:01:08 this terminology is used. But at first it's confusing and off-putting, I mean emptiness.

00:01:21 There's that Jewish Buddhist humor thing, I don't know if you've seen on the internet

00:01:25 all these Jewish Buddhist jokes. There's one, I can't remember exactly, I'm paraphrasing,

00:01:33 but what's Zen? Well you bust your tush for 40 years and what do you have to show for

00:01:48 it at the end? Babkas. Babkas means, I mean it means beans literally, but it means like

00:01:56 nothing, right? You've got nothing to show for it. Well yeah but it's a very special

00:02:03 nothing. I mean when I started I had no idea what these terms referred to. They sounded

00:02:10 weird, they sounded interesting. I learned how to say them in a half dozen Asian languages,

00:02:17 but it's like I didn't know what they were talking about. Emptiness, well actually sometimes

00:02:23 people would say like the void, so of course I had this image of this like gaping thing

00:02:31 that's going to suck you in. Actually there's a little validity to that in the sense of

00:02:38 the expansiveness of the formless jhanas. That's part of it, but not at all the whole

00:02:48 picture. So you know I would hear about the void or the emptiness and I'd try to formulate

00:02:57 in my mind what it must be. And of course it's not just the Buddhists that talk about

00:03:06 things like that. Essentially all the mystics all around the world have used very similar

00:03:17 languaging and the language is counterintuitive, it's strange sounding, and yet it lines up

00:03:27 across cultures which tends to indicate that there's something universal going on here.

00:03:34 Why would the cultures that had no contact, I mean obviously sometimes the cultures have

00:03:40 contact, there's cultural diffusion, but I mean why should something written in the 6th

00:03:48 century in Sri Lanka line up so well with something written in the 16th century in Spain

00:03:56 and those worlds had no contact at all. But you read Teresa Avila's Interior Castle and

00:04:04 you read the Visuddhimagga and it's not perfect but there's a lot of alignment there, surprising

00:04:13 alignment. Teresa ends up saying in the end it took her a lifetime, she went through the

00:04:20 jhanas, the Christian version of that, and only at the very end of her career did she

00:04:27 come to this transformation in her understanding. You can see that she struggles to convey the

00:04:37 difference. She's described all of these ever deeper states of recollection, tranquility,

00:04:48 and so forth, and then you can see her struggling to try to describe something that belonged

00:04:54 to a whole other dimension. She said it was an intellectual vision, but then she said,

00:05:01 but I don't mean that I saw a vision of Jesus or something, something changed in my mind

00:05:08 and my concept about things and what changed was, to use her words, the self-forgetting

00:05:18 is so profound that it seems as though the soul no longer exists. Well that's streametric.

00:05:30 The salient defining feature is insight into the non-somethingness of self, the sakhaya

00:05:40 identity, the view that there is a sakhaya, a thing, an entity called self within. Now

00:05:48 you might think that writing in the age of the Inquisition in Spain that someone would

00:05:57 get in trouble for saying something like that, but she didn't get into trouble at all. In

00:06:02 fact she became the main mapmaker for Christian mystics, it's like, okay, because she gave

00:06:09 such clear descriptions. So it's sort of interesting that these descriptions somewhat line up and

00:06:16 they're counterintuitive. So emptiness and nothingness is like across all the traditions.

00:06:23 So I, you know, in my mind I tried to imagine, and I mentioned that there was a period in

00:06:32 my, when I and the rest of the United States was doing a lot of LSD, some of you remember

00:06:39 that time, that's why you're here now. Anyway, so I had these ideas about what the void was

00:06:52 supposed to be then, and I have ideas now, except the ideas now are not based on speculation,

00:07:01 they're based on direct experience. So if I were to say what the emptiness means to

00:07:11 me, what comes to my mind first, it's two things. A kind of bounciness, like a basketball

00:07:24 that like bounces. And the second thing would be a connectivity, a connector that holds

00:07:36 the whole universe together and therefore is naturally linked to a sense of love. So

00:07:43 that's really counterintuitive, you wouldn't think emptiness would have either this springiness

00:07:51 or a sense of connectivity or love, it just doesn't quite compute. But that's, those

00:08:01 are the first things that come to my mind. So, and yet we also, I can also understand

00:08:10 why they call it vacuity or emptiness or nothingness, etc., etc. So yeah, it's counterintuitive.

00:08:21 I could also tell you that like an apple, the first thing that hits your teeth when

00:08:29 you bite into an apple is not necessarily representative of the whole apple. Unless

00:08:37 you peel it, you get the skin which is sort of hard and dry. But most of the apple is

00:08:44 going to be juicy and sweet. And the first bite that people take into emptiness, which

00:08:52 is a phase that might last a few hours or a few years, when your teeth are just getting

00:09:00 beyond the skin, that's not, that experience might be sort of bleak and flat and vacuous.

00:09:11 But that's just getting past the skin. Once you're past that, it's this other thing, it's

00:09:19 this springy connectivity that provides safety, fulfillment and a sense of love. So anyway,

00:09:38 the, in the online someone asked me the different flavors of no-self. And every time I think

00:09:50 about that, I come up with a different list over the years. So like a list came up to

00:09:58 me and I thought it was interesting, so I thought I would share it with you. But who

00:10:04 knows what it will be next month or next year. That's the thing, it's, you know the story

00:10:11 of the elephant and the blind man, but you may not know that that comes from Buddhism.

00:10:20 It's a metaphor. The elephant is enlightenment. People have, tend to see a certain part of

00:10:32 it and so describe it. Well, it's like a rope or it's like a wall or it's like a pillar

00:10:40 or it's like a sharp, like a tusk. Or it's like a hose. Well, yeah, all of that, all

00:10:51 of that, because there's all these different facets to it, which is, can be confusing.

00:10:59 So it's important not to fixate one's view. One of my teachers used to say,

00:11:06 Kyo no satori wa ashita no machigai. Today's enlightenment is tomorrow's mistake.

00:11:13 Meaning not error, but rather that your perspective broadens and deepens and changes as time goes

00:11:20 on. So when people do come to an experience, either slowly and smoothly or suddenly, of

00:11:30 emptiness, no self, what have you, one of the first pieces of advice I give them is

00:11:35 don't fixate however compelling today's view of it may be for you. Don't fixate that it's

00:11:45 got to be that way. And for God's sake, don't stop studying with competent teachers. Because

00:11:52 sometimes people go off, they think they're done when they're just beginning, actually.

00:12:01 So we have this meeting that takes place every few years, where the so-called Western teachers,

00:12:17 which means people teaching Buddhism full-time in the West, it doesn't have

anything to do

00:12:23 with your race, it's just where your main activity is, is it in the Americas and Europe

00:12:29 and so forth, as opposed to the homeland of Buddhism, Asia. So there's this Western teachers

00:12:36 meeting and it's like a professional meeting for people that do this full-time. So it's

00:12:45 interesting and for me, I've always enjoyed it. It's a lot of fun. And it's like a professional

00:12:54 meeting and people discuss topics and so forth. So this was a number of years ago, we broke

00:13:07 up into interest groups. So you got to choose what interest group you're going to be. So

00:13:17 I chose the group that was called, quote, how do you deal with the issue of enlightenment?

00:13:26 So I thought that sounds interesting. I'll go to that group because I definitely have

00:13:32 some ideas. But it was like sort of sad because it turns out it wasn't what I thought it was.

00:13:49 The topic was not what I thought. I thought it's like, okay, a bunch of teachers are going

00:13:53 to get together and tell their strategies and their algorithms for leading people to

00:13:59 stream entering. But that's not what it was about. It was about how do you avoid marginalizing

00:14:11 students who aren't yet enlightened and still talk about enlightenment. It was like the

00:14:19 avatar of everything that's wrong with politically correct. Sorry if that offended someone. But

00:14:28 it's like, well, we don't want to make people feel bad because they're not enlightened yet

00:14:37 or whatever. So it's like, oh, well, that's not what I thought that was going to be. So

00:14:48 let me say what I couldn't say in that meeting. Well, in general, any approach has the potential

00:15:06 of showing you the no self, any approach. So it's not like one is privileged over another.

00:15:16 And in fact, it's not infrequent that no approach shows someone no self. So people that don't

00:15:25 meditate, that don't have a practice, it just happens. Not uncommon. So in theory, any of

00:15:37 the techniques can do the trick or some combination thereof. But if someone

were to come to me

00:15:48 and actually specifically say, I want stream entry, what I would probably start them off

00:15:55 on is the focus in technique. That entails working with mental images, mental talk, and

00:16:04 body motion. I'm saying that's what I would probably start off with, not like, oh yes,

00:16:10 this is the silver bullet, the white knight, the magic thing that guarantees stream entry.

00:16:18 But for me, in my algorithm, it's a good place to start because it's pretty straightforward.

00:16:25 A beginner can do it. And it's likely to bring some sort of insight fairly quickly. So the

00:16:36 idea is that you go to image space and there's either images or there isn't. So you note,

00:16:46 see or rest. Then you go to talk space, same thing. Emotional body, same thing. Then you

00:16:51 work with the whole system. So when you're working with the whole system, different things

00:17:01 can happen. One of the things that can happen is that the system goes offline, typically

00:17:09 momentarily. Mental screen is blank, head is quiet, body is emotionally neutral. Now,

00:17:21 typically the reason that happens is that something in the outer system sort of expands

00:17:31 in intensity. A physical sensation or a sound. There's a lot of famous Zen stories along

00:17:39 these lines. Someone's enlightened by hearing a pebble strike the broom or the teacher shouts.

00:17:56 Or one of my favorites, when you take a bath in the Zen temple in Japan, you bathe in something

00:18:07 that looks like this except it's like huge and it's a pot actually that's heated from

00:18:13 the bottom. You take off all your clothes and there's this statue of Baradwaja, who's

00:18:24 the patron of the bathing area. You have to bow down like this or whatever because he

00:18:31 was an arhat and the way he got enlightenment was taking a bath. Okay. It's like, okay,

00:18:38 a bath can do it. So typically external sight, external sound and body and or physical body

00:18:51 sensation sort of impinges suddenly. And if you're monitoring the inner

system, instead

00:19:00 of getting pulled into that, you notice that as that expands, the inner system goes into

00:19:06 a state of relative rest. Now that can happen to people in an early part of their practice.

00:19:15 That's already, that's not like enlightenment or anything, but they're already getting a

00:19:21 sort of insight as to how this system works. Now there's another version of that that's

00:19:31 more dramatic. And if that happens and you have a clear experience, that might change

00:19:40 things on a more permanent basis. Instead of the inner system going into a relative

00:19:47 state of rest, meaning see rest, hear rest, feel rest, you're aware your screen is blank,

00:19:53 you're listening to quiet in your head, your body's emotionally neutral. Instead of that,

00:20:01 you're aware that the inner space itself just vanishes. There is no image space, there is

00:20:12 no talk space, there is no emotional body space. That's absolute rest in the inner system.

00:20:23 It's like the relative rest that a beginner can have only more so. So one flavor of no

00:20:33 self even a beginner can experience. It's like for a moment there's relative rest, maybe

00:20:42 because there's a strong activation on the outside. The inner system gets relatively

00:20:48 restful. Then there's a much more impactful restful state that's an absolute rest, a cessation

00:21:00 of the space of self itself. So there's two flavors of no self right there. What else?

00:21:11 Well does that mean that in order to experience no self the inner system has to turn off?

00:21:19 Well not necessarily. The inner system can be quite active, but it's not tangled and

00:21:35 not coagulated. If the inner system activates even strongly, but all the strands are clearly

00:21:46 separate, they're not crisscrossing in an unconscious way, and if there's little or

00:21:53 no freezing or coagulation in that system, it'll be active, but it's a kind of flow self.

00:22:05 And that is yet another flavor of no self. It's tricky though to truly

untangle that

00:22:15 inner system because the tangling is at many scales simultaneously. My metaphor would be

00:22:23 if, let's say you have three kinds of strands, red, green and blue. The problem is they exist

00:22:33 at many, many diameters. There's like, you know, there's three inch thick and one inch

00:22:42 thick and a tenth of an inch thick and, you know, a half a centimeter and a millimeter

00:22:53 and even sub-millimeter. There's all, for each one of the three colors there's all these

00:23:02 different scales and now they're all intertwined. So inside red is subtle blue and inside that

00:23:11 is subtler green, etc., etc., and then maybe even subtler red again. So to fully untangle

00:23:20 that scale takes a little bit of practice. But if you can sufficiently untangle it and

00:23:29 if you can let go of the tendency to tighten around its arising and passing, oh my God,

00:23:39 did it take me years to not resist the arising of self. Because I thought, well, the goal

00:23:48 of this practice is quote no self, so if I'm aware of a self I'm a failure with the practice

00:23:53 and that creates all sorts of tension. It took a long time to get out of that bad rookie

00:24:02 habit. So anyway, the inner system activates perhaps even strongly, perhaps even in a very

00:24:13 negative way, but it's untangled and unblocked. That will create another flavor of self, of

00:24:26 no self rather. It's a freedom because of intensity of clarity. It's an untangling effect.

00:24:37 It's an anti-emergent quality. Turns out that one of the requisites for the somethingness

00:24:46 of self is that there be a kind of tangling of things. So the satkhyaditti depends on

00:24:59 lack of clarity. In fact, you probably know that there's a traditional metaphor that's

00:25:09 very famous in the Buddhist world. A monk named Nagasena learned it from a nun named

00:25:25 Vajira and he passed it on to King Melinda, also known as King Menandros. So Melinda is

00:25:36 what he was known as in Pali, but his Greek name was Menandros. He was a

Greek king about

00:25:47 2,000 years ago in the western part of India, part of the remnant from Alexander's invasions

00:25:56 of India. So he's a westerner and he had this dialogue with the Buddhist monk Nagasena and

00:26:06 it's recorded in Pali literature. It's fascinating. We know that this Menandros was a real person

00:26:12 because he's recorded in Greek history also. In the western accounts, it is said that he

00:26:26 died very peacefully. So maybe it's true that he did actually become a Buddhist meditator.

00:26:35 In any event, the conversation has been preserved. It's called Melinda Panha, the questions of

00:26:43 King Melinda or Menandros. So Nagasena gives the metaphor of a chariot and he goes through

00:26:57 all the different parts of the chariot and says, is the chariot the wheels? Is the chariot

00:27:04 the body? Is the chariot the axle tree? Is the chariot this, that? And the king has to

00:27:11 admit, no, none of those parts are it. And then he says, well, it's the same for self.

00:27:17 And then he goes through the five aggregates or something like that. I can't remember exactly.

00:27:23 He sort of breaks selfhood into its components and tries to show the king that there is no

00:27:29 thing inside called a self. So that's a famous metaphor. I have my own version, which I think

00:27:43 is more to the point, neuroanatomically. And most of you have heard this, but I'll just

00:27:55 go over it quickly. So you have an old-fashioned CRT TV screen and monitor and there's white

00:28:09 on the screen. It's a color monitor, but it shows white on the screen. And I say to you,

00:28:15 there is no quality of white on this screen. And you say, are you nuts? Just look at it.

00:28:22 It's white. And I say, well, here's a magnifying glass. And we agree that this does nothing

00:28:31 but make things a little bigger and resolve. Resolve means things that fall together to

00:28:40 the naked eye are separated by the lens. You can look this up if you want to know what

00:28:46 the resolution power is. Resolution power doesn't change what's out there. It

just means

00:28:52 that things that are tangled get untangled. And I say, okay, so now we're going to approach

00:29:00 this white screen with this magnifying glass, which we agree does nothing but make things

00:29:06 look larger and resolve. In other words, untangle the sensory components. And what's going to

00:29:14 happen as we approach? The impression white will go away and the impression red, green,

00:29:22 blue little pixels will arise. And that's what was always there. So an emergent quality.

00:29:29 This is a metaphor, just like Naga Singh and Sister Vajira's metaphor. This is a metaphor

00:29:37 that probably is a little closer to the actual underlying neuroscience of the thing, although

00:29:46 it's probably not identical, but I think it's closer than the traditional one. There's an

00:29:53 emergent property in perception that requires a tangling of the sensory components. And

00:30:04 as they get untangled, that emergent quality disappears. In the case of the white on the

00:30:12 screen, the emergent quality is the impression of whiteness. In the case of self, the emergent

00:30:20 quality is the impression it's a thing. So as you look more and more carefully, I like

00:30:31 to do it inner-seer field, but we could do the five skandhas, we could do the four elements,

00:30:36 we could do the four foundations of mindfulness. There's a lot of ways that you can parse that

00:30:45 pie. The important thing is not so much what categories you use, but the magic of the dimensional

00:30:55 analysis. I like the inner-seer field because it satisfies Occam's razor. It's the simplest

00:31:05 one that I know of. You can look up the five aggregates or five skandhas on Wikipedia and

00:31:14 see if you can imagine meditating based on the definitions you see there, because it's

00:31:19 pretty inscrutable. But anyway, so that's why I like to use this other thing. It's simpler

00:31:32 and it's immediately observable. You have to be a very, very advanced meditator to be

00:31:38 able to observe the samskaras, for example. No beginner can observe that, but

any beginner

00:31:48 can observe inner-seer field. So that's another flavor of no-self. That's the no-self that

00:31:57 just comes from untangling the system. Are there other flavors of no-self? Yeah. If there's

00:32:16 enough unblocking, if there's enough decoagulation, the inner system arises as sort of like a

00:32:29 lot of vibrating bubbles. It's like effervescent bubbles. It's all flow. If you get that where

00:32:41 the inner system is mostly like just shimmering on your screen and stirring in talk space

00:32:49 and a kind of undercurrent of activity in the emotional body that may not have any particular

00:32:57 flavor to it, but it's like the emotional circuits are sort of idling down there. If

00:33:03 you get this fluid experience of the inner system, that's a whole other flavor of no-self.

00:33:10 What I like to do when that happens is cover inner space because you may not be able to

00:33:20 parse the seer field very clearly when it goes into that subtle level of vibratory flow,

00:33:30 but what you can do is cover the whole space and then just let your awareness soak into

00:33:35 it. The more you soak into it, the more vibrant the space becomes. Okay, well that's a whole

00:33:43 other flavor of no-self which is sort of like the flow-self. Some of these flavors of no-self

00:33:57 are available to beginning meditators. Some of them not so much. The disappearance of

00:34:06 inner space, that's a little bit on the advanced side. There's also an advanced version of

00:34:15 the flow-self. If the system becomes pliant enough, each time there's an inner activation,

00:34:29 that means each time there's a reaction to the outer world, each time there's memory

00:34:34 plant fantasy, each time there's a judgment or a conviction or a confusion that arises

00:34:41 in the inner system, each time there's an awareness that was fermented into existence

00:34:54 by simultaneous expansion and contraction. Now, when that starts to happen, the ordinary

00:35:05 self, all these ordinary things, including your confusions and your desires

and your

00:35:14 judgments, they're never disconnected from the Source because they arise in the folds

00:35:25 of expansion and contraction. Sort of the two sides of God, if you want to sort of get

00:35:35 the G word. Some people don't like that word, but I like it. If you don't, then use something

00:35:42 else. Expansion and contraction. So expansion and contraction, they touch each ordinary

00:35:54 part of you. On the other hand, they touch that collapse of space thing also, because

00:36:06 that's where they come from. Plus and minus pull apart, expansion and contraction polarize.

00:36:22 And then they neutralize. When they neutralize, the space of experience goes away. And when

00:36:29 that happens with the inner space, that's absolute rest. And then that absolute rest

00:36:36 breaks apart into the absolute flow of simultaneous expansion and contraction. So it's an extraordinary

00:36:44 thing when your ordinary experience of self is embraced on the inside and outside by the

00:36:56 spiritual Source. And then there's no reason why that doesn't also extend out to the outer

00:37:06 sphere field. So actually, when someone gets enlightened, the world gets enlightened. There's

00:37:14 a famous Zen story to that effect. This person struggled for years and years and years as

00:37:23 a monk to get enlightenment. It didn't work out. And he was living on this mountain called

00:37:28 Dozan. And finally he gave up and went to the master. And the master told him something.

00:37:39 I don't remember the exact story. But he said, okay, if you have to leave the temple, you

00:37:45 know, you have to leave. But something, sorry, I forgot what the something was. But as he's

00:37:54 going down the mountain, whatever that something was, it had planted the seed. And he suddenly

00:38:03 had this realization after all these years of struggling and confusion. And he blurted

00:38:10 out the words that just came out of his mouth were, the mountain has become enlightened,

00:38:18 not I became enlightened. So what does that mean? It just means that the

external see,

00:38:30 hear, feel is born in the folds of the same polarization of the Source.

That's all. So

00:38:41 traditionally when it happens to the inner system, we call it Muga in Japanese, means

00:38:50 no self. When it happens to everything, inner and outer, it's called ku or emptiness. But

00:38:57 the really just the same thing. So these are a few ways to think tangibly about

00:39:15 no self. And at least a couple of those would be something you can understand and even a

00:39:23 beginner can pursue with practice.