

The Absolute Witness ~ Shinzen Young

00:00:00 People often ask me about, quote, the witness and about non-dual awareness. One of the difficulties

00:00:17 in answering questions on these topics is that there's quite a bit of ambiguity as to

00:00:24 what the words, the witness or the phrase non-dual awareness should refer to. In other

00:00:33 words, these words and phrases are used differently by different people. And so to give a sort

00:00:41 of single answer to questions regarding these without taking into account the fact that

00:00:48 the terms may mean different things to different people is the road to disaster, actually,

00:00:57 gross misunderstanding and possibly even contentious malaise.

00:01:04 So, one can use the word witness, I think, in two senses. One is the sense that there

00:01:16 is a thing over here that's sort of observing the its over there and in some way detached

00:01:26 from the its that are being observed. So there's one sense of witness.

00:01:34 In that sense, the word witness is a very different word. It's a different word for

00:01:41 something that's being observed. So there's one sense of witness. In that sense, witness

00:01:48 is just a way of describing a certain level of equanimity. And from that perspective,

00:01:59 yeah, that's a good thing to have that sense of I'm just witnessing. Stuff is, you know,

00:02:06 there's the phenomena are coming and going and they can't get to me because I'm back

00:02:13 here. I call that a distance-creating metaphor for equanimity. I should point out it's

00:02:20 not the only metaphor for equanimity. You can also have a distance-collapsing metaphor,

00:02:25 which is I'm so totally with the phenomena that it can't get to me because I'm like

00:02:32 glued to it. But in any event, if we want to use the word witness in the sense of a

00:02:40 metaphor for equanimity, that's fine. That is not at all, however, at the

same level

00:02:51 as witness in the sense of the absolute witness.

00:02:58 When you have a sense that there's a sort of observer, a thing that's observing or a

00:03:09 person that's observing, but sort of separate and detached, that's good because it's equanimity,

00:03:17 but it's also important to realize that that's being produced by subtle feel-image talk.

00:03:24 I wouldn't say that that's the absolute witness or pure consciousness, but it's a good thing.

00:03:32 It's a stage that people go through. However, it's of the utmost importance that a person

00:03:38 not get stuck in that stage and think, oh, well, this is the ultimate goal of things.

00:03:45 Then what is the true witness? In my way of thinking, the true witness is contentless

00:03:58 consciousness, that in my system you directly eyeball for just a brief second every time

00:04:05 you observe a phenomenon disappearing. In other words, whenever any phenomenon disappears,

00:04:16 what is actually happening is that the two forces that are molding that phenomenon, you

00:04:23 can call them life and death or affirmation-negation or expansion and contraction or expansion

00:04:30 and contraction or a whole lot of other things, the two forces that have molded that phenomenon

00:04:40 cancel out and there is a cessation, neurota, a collapsing or disappearing of time-space

00:04:47 for, quote, a fraction of a second. That's, of course, a time metaphor, right? By an external

00:04:54 clock for a fraction of a second. There's a little puncture in the time-space continuum.

00:05:03 Of course, that little puncture eats up all of time and space. It's the black hole that

00:05:10 sort of eats up the universe and then spits it out again in the next moment of consciousness.

00:05:19 My teacher Sasaki Roshi calls that zero. That's what I would call the true witness, but the

00:05:27 true witness doesn't see anything and it's not back here somewhere because there is no

00:05:33 back. It's not in the back. It's in the center. It's not in the center. It's in the center

00:05:38 because there is no back. There is no forward. There is no extension in time and space. It

00:05:45 eats up time and space. It's not inside time and space.

00:05:52 When you become the true witness, there's no sense of witnessing anything, any phenomenon.

00:05:59 There's no sense of anything. It's contentless consciousness. It's nothing whatsoever. Now,

00:06:05 some people wouldn't call that the witness. Some people would just call that emptiness

00:06:13 or the source or cessation, a nerota, a moment of cessation. If you had to say there's a

00:06:21 witness, in an absolute sense, that's what I would point to. That witness punctures the

00:06:30 time-space continuum thousands and thousands and thousands of times every day for everyone.

00:06:38 The only difference between the so-called enlightened people and everybody else is they

00:06:43 notice it and they know that they are that nothing.

00:06:48 If you read in the Yoga Sutras Patanjali, the classic text of Raja Yoga, he begins the

00:06:55 Yoga Sutras by saying,

00:07:00 atah yoganushasanam yogas chittavrtti nirodhah

00:07:06 atadadrashtuh svarupe vasthanam

00:07:11 So, atah yoganushasanam. Okay, this is the science of yoga. Yoga is chittavrtti nirodhah,

00:07:20 the cessation, nirodhah, the cessation of the fluctuations of consciousness.

00:07:28 Then and only then does the drishti, the true observer, abide in its nature.

00:07:40 If we wanted to call that nothingness, that very special nothingness, the true observer, we could.

00:07:47 But that's very different from the sense of there's somebody back here detached watching things.

00:07:57 In order to go from there's somebody back here detached watching things to the experience of cessation,

00:08:06 you have to be able to detect the disappearance of the subtle feel-image-talk

00:08:14 that creates the sense that there's any thing or person extended in time and space or positioned in any location.

00:08:28 You have to see the disappearance of the subtle feel-image-talk that creates that impression.

00:08:34 And the place where that relative witness disappears to is the place of the absolute witness.