

Expansion and Contraction – Part 1: Kenotic Christianity and Shuniya ~ Shinzen Young

00:00:00 We've been talking about a number of themes. We talked about the theme of change, impermanence.

00:00:29 We also have been talking about the theme of that which represents no change. It could

00:00:37 be described as the one or the zero, depending on your tradition of practice. We talked about

00:00:48 the parallel between one and zero. The one is the balance point between stretch and squeeze.

00:01:05 The zero is the balance point between moving this way and moving that way, the center of

00:01:11 the coordinate grid, the origin. They play the same role. Zero is to addition as the

00:01:23 one is to multiplication. The point being that we have contrasting activities. There's

00:01:33 a way of multiplicatively affirming and negating. They're called stretch and squeeze. There's

00:01:41 a way of additively affirming and negating. One's called go this way. The other one's

00:01:48 called go exactly the opposite direction and equal amount. The balance point could be called

00:01:55 zero or could be called one. At the still point of the turning world, as T.S. Eliot

00:02:02 put it, neither movement from nor towards. At the still point there the dance is, but

00:02:12 do not call it fixity where past and future are gathered. We talked about movement, change,

00:02:27 flow and vanishing. In the way that I like to describe things, my own technical vocabulary

00:02:39 for describing experience, any abrupt disappearance I call a vanishing. When you label, the label

00:02:49 for that is gone, something is gone. Any other aspect of change, any increase, decrease,

00:02:58 affirmation, negation, speeding up, slowing down, spreading, collapsing, moving this way,

00:03:03 moving the opposite way, I refer to that all generically as flow, just to have a general

00:03:10 term for it. One might say that there are two fundamental flavors of flow. If we consider

00:03:20 that any kind of movement would be molded by an interplay of opposites. The Greeks lacked

00:03:29 both negative numbers and zero. China had negative numbers but no zero. It was only

00:03:35 the genius of ancient India, their mental set, that could see that you could have zero

00:03:47 as an authentic number. They called it shunya or shunyata, which literally means emptiness.

00:03:55 It's cognate to the Greek word kenos, K-E-N-O-S, which means empty. It's a Greek cognate to

00:04:02 the Sanskrit word shunya because the K sound in Greek corresponds to a SH sound in Sanskrit.

00:04:11 So shunya, kenos. Kenotic as an adjective, meaning relating to emptying out, describes

00:04:24 what God had to do in order to incarnate as Jesus. It also describes what Christians were

00:04:33 supposed to do with themselves in order to experience oneness with God, empty out, annihilate

00:04:43 the somethingness within. That's called kenotic Christianity, Christianity based on the notion

00:04:52 of a oneness, a union in Greek, a oneness with God comes about through an emptying of

00:05:05 the somethingness of self. Except to become God, this is tricky. There's two words in

00:05:12 Greek that correspond to one word in Latin. The one word in Latin is deification. The

00:05:20 two words in Greek are theosis and apotheosis. We even have the word apotheosis, meaning

00:05:27 the very embodiment of something. Apotheosis means to become God in the sense of like the

00:05:34 emperors of the ancient world claimed they were gods. But theosis as a Christian term

00:05:43 meant to experience a direct participation in the spiritual source. But they become one

00:05:59 word in Greek, in Latin, deification. The subtle distinction is lost. Shunya, emptying

00:06:08 out, kenosis. It's the same in the East and the same in the West. If you want to have

00:06:15 a direct experience of that balance point, that nothing, that very rich nothing, that

00:06:22 very special nothing that is the source, since that's the still point, how do you get to

00:06:29 the still point? Many possible ways, actually. One of them, paradoxically, is to utterly

00:06:38 surrender to the opposite of stillness, which is the movement and the flow. We can think

00:06:48 of movement as generated by a dialectical process of back and forth. I have mentioned

00:06:59 a number of times in these talks things that my teacher, Sasaki Roshi, Joshu Sasaki Roshi

00:07:07 says. You can look him up on the internet. If you go to Mount Baldy Zen Center website,

00:07:13 you can see pictures of him and find out about his teachings. When I first translated for

00:07:21 him, even though I had a very impressive background in Buddhist scholarship and many, many years

00:07:29 of practice, I couldn't understand what he was talking about. I could mechanically translate

00:07:35 it into English. But I made a lot of mistakes at the beginning in translating. One of them,

00:07:47 I remember he said, which literally means, Westerners are weak in abstraction. Now, I

00:08:04 thought that Zen was against abstraction, so he must be putting down Westerners. So

00:08:13 I mistranslated it, as Westerners are too abstract. But actually, that's not what he

00:08:21 meant. He meant, they're not abstract enough. My preconceptions about what Zen was supposed

00:08:30 to be got in the way. What he was really saying is, they're not abstract enough to see that

00:08:38 a gazillion things that they think are completely different are actually reflections of exactly

00:08:46 the same thing. What are the gazillion things that they think are different that are really

00:08:53 reflections of the same thing? What is that one thing that they are reflections of?