

Leonard Cohen, Sasaki Roshi, & 'Love Itself' - Part 1 of 2 ~ Shinzen Young

00:00:00 A number of years ago, at a retreat in Ithaca, New York, Leonard told me that he was going
00:00:26 to retire from music. And then, a few years later, he came out of retirement. And he came
00:00:37 out with a CD that he called Ten New Songs, which of course sort of fits, right? They're
00:00:43 new songs. He came out of retirement. And the fifth cut on that CD blows me away. The
00:00:55 whole album is dedicated to, quote, our teacher, Joshua Sasaki Roshi. Inside the works of Leonard
00:01:07 Cohen, which are known all over the world, of course in the United States, even more
00:01:13 so in Canada, where he comes from. He's got a house in Montreal, where he grew up. And
00:01:22 very much in Europe, especially France. His works are known all over the world. But what
00:01:29 isn't known is that they are peppered with inside allusions to the teachings of Sasaki
00:01:37 Roshi. The fifth cut on the Ten New Songs is called Love Itself. And it's Leonard's
00:01:47 version of the Taisho, or Zen talk, of Sasaki Roshi. Unless somebody pointed out, you wouldn't
00:01:55 realize that. So Sasaki Roshi has only one talk. There is zero. But zero is inherently
00:02:05 unstable. Because it consists of all of the positive and negative in the universe. Therefore,
00:02:09 inevitably, it breaks apart into expansion and contraction. Expansion only knows how
00:02:15 to expand. Contraction only knows how to contract. So in between, they create a vibration called
00:02:21 space. And that vibration is further nurtured and matured in the cleft between them. And
00:02:29 it evolves into a feeling, thinking self. That either knows it just came from zero,
00:02:36 in which case we call it an enlightened self, or it doesn't. If it knows where it just
00:02:41 came from, it knows to give it the positive that it received from father back to father
00:02:47 and the negative that it received from mother back to the mother. Therefore, it disappears.
00:02:53 There's nothing in between father and mother anymore. And they come back together to create
00:02:58 a new state of zero. Oh, you don't understand. Okay, well I'll try to say a little more than
00:03:11 he says exactly the same thing. And then I see you still don't understand. Well, let
00:03:20 me see if I can say some more. But you see, each time he says it, he lives it. So he could
00:03:26 say it forever. He lives that cycle. And if you sense that he's living that cycle, you
00:03:32 could listen, you could hear him say it forever. So anyway, you're going to see in this song,
00:03:39 there's a refrain. It imitates the style of Sasaki Roshi, but there's more to it. Sasaki
00:03:49 Roshi talks about this little room of space where father and mother vibrate. And they
00:03:59 come into contrast, you reunite, come into contrast, reunite. He always describes it
00:04:03 as like a private little room where there's only the two sides of the source.
00:04:10 Now many of you have experienced that there are different flavors of flow, different flavors
00:04:19 of impermanence. I look upon the expansion and contraction as the fundamental flavors.
00:04:25 When a wave comes up on the shore, the top of the wave is expanding, the bottom of the
00:04:31 wave is contracting. And in the cleft, as they're sheared apart, is born all this foam.
00:04:40 So there's wavy flow, there's vibratory flow, which is analogous to the foam. But underlying
00:04:47 it all is this expansion and contraction. But often, the most prominent experience of

00:04:56 flow or change or impermanence is a kind of scintillating, misty, bubbly kind of flow.
00:05:07 And it's very blissful, often. And your whole body and mind and the external world can dissolve
00:05:17 into it. And it's like trillions of little moats of dust, sort of, just shimmering. Some
00:05:27 of you have had that experience. Because it's blissful, there is the danger of being attached
00:05:39 to it. But if you don't become attached to that, then it all sort of flatlines into zero.
00:05:50 All the little vibrations go back to the source. Father and mother come together and there
00:06:00 is shalom bimromav, the peace of heaven. So if having that champagne bubbly experience
00:06:19 of flow is like being made love to, in a sense, what's beyond that is the gone. And what's
00:06:31 beyond the gone? Well, after gone, there's no place to go but to come back to self and
00:06:40 world. But to see it in a different way, for having had that experience. And to do this
00:06:47 over and over and over again until there is no fundamental separation between the experience
00:06:59 of the source and ordinary experience. They're on a continuum. There's not a duality between
00:07:07 the deepest, transcendent, empty, timeless, spaceless cessation. There's not a duality
00:07:18 between that and any ordinary experience. They're on a continuum. So that's living nirvana.
00:07:26 There's nothing in between one's humanity and that which is beyond the human. And that
00:07:33 would pretty much describe the world of a master. So there is the formless, there is
00:07:43 the form, and then there is them not being fundamentally separate. So in the end, if
00:07:55 you want to experience what Sasaki Roshi calls true love, honto no ai, use that expression,
00:08:03 says everybody wants true love, but they don't realize that true love is zero. True love
00:08:12 is what happens if you're willing to let go of the most celestial form of love other than
00:08:32 true love. So you'd have to even let go of the message of the spirit. So understanding
00:08:43 this, you are in a position to completely understand Leonard's song called Love Itself.