

Mindfulness, Cancer & Healing - 1 of 3 ~ Sat Dharam Kaur, N.D. Interviews Shinzen Young

00:00:00 I'm speaking with Shinzen Yang, an internationally recognized teacher of mindfulness meditation.

00:00:21 Thank you for agreeing to speak with me, Shinzen.

00:00:23 My pleasure.

00:00:24 I'm interested in your recommendations for women who have been newly diagnosed with breast

00:00:30 cancer or are recovering from breast cancer in terms of a meditation technique that may

00:00:35 help them both to recover as much as possible from the disease and help them to heal in

00:00:43 general.

00:00:44 What would your recommendations be?

00:00:47 There is a vast range of possible ways that you can focus your attention to deal with

00:00:57 the situation of having breast cancer.

00:01:03 The way I like to analyze that situation is first to frame it within a broader context.

00:01:12 What's true of breast cancer would be true actually of any kind of cancer.

00:01:18 What's true of any kind of cancer would be true of any disease or health situation, including

00:01:27 an injury if you were injured and had to go to the hospital.

00:01:31 In general, when one is facing some sort of health crisis of any kind, there are two broad

00:01:43 ways that people use meditation to deal with that.

00:01:50 Those are not mutually exclusive.

00:01:54 One can do one, the other, or both, but I think it is important to realize the relationships

00:02:03 between them and what they are.

00:02:06 One way of meditating, and by meditating I just mean focusing in some systematic way.

00:02:13 That's all I mean by meditating.

00:02:16 One way to meditate or focus in a systematic way has as its goal to influence the objective

00:02:24 course of the healing, objectively.

00:02:28 We want to diminish the cancer.

00:02:31 We want to heal the wound quickly and so forth.

00:02:35 I call that impacting the objective course of the healing.

00:02:42 There are a wide range of procedures, different kinds of focuses, that are aimed at that goal.

00:02:53 In our discussion before we started taping this interview, you talked about a number

00:02:59 of approaches that you had studied that have history and background and so forth.

00:03:05 If we look at them, as I recall back, some of them were specifically aimed at, okay,

00:03:13 there's going to be healing.

00:03:14 There's going to be an actual change in your situation.

00:03:18 The cancer is going to get smaller or something like that.

00:03:21 Can you remind me what some of the approaches that were sort of along those lines are?

00:03:26 One of the approaches was the approach of Bill Bengston, who worked with mice and humans,

00:03:34 but he tried to teach university students how to heal cancers, tumors, and mice, and

00:03:39 found that when those students were creating images in their minds of positive things that
00:03:46 they wanted in their lives, and one of those images also being that all of the mice were
00:03:51 cured and that they were toasting a glass of champagne together because all of the mice
00:03:55 were cured, that that imaging and the repetitions of those images as they were holding the mice
00:04:01 for an hour a day in a cage allowed them to actually, unbeknownst to them, cure those
00:04:06 mice after about a month's time.
00:04:08 They thought at the end of the experiment that the experiment was a gullibility experiment,
00:04:13 that every few days new mice were put in the cage who had smaller tumors, and they, at
00:04:18 the end of the experiment, didn't believe actually that they had cured the mice, but
00:04:21 it was their mental state at the time that seemed to have influenced the healing with
00:04:26 those positive images they had.
00:04:28 And this was an intentional creation of images.
00:04:31 Right.
00:04:32 Right.
00:04:33 Okay, very good.
00:04:35 So that would be the goal.
00:04:38 Are there other procedures that you can think of historically where the goal has been to
00:04:46 change the object of course?
00:04:47 Well, the Dr. Mears, Ainsley Mears from Australia, he worked in the 1970s with his patients with
00:04:56 meditation techniques for cancer.
00:04:59 He was also a medical hypnotist.
00:05:01 And his technique was to create a sense of relaxation, to have the patient create a strong
00:05:07 relaxation state, a stillness of mind, an observation of thought, and a very quiet,
00:05:13 quietening process of the mind without any real imaging of, you know, I'm going to cure
00:05:20 this disease.
00:05:21 A change, right.
00:05:22 Yeah.
00:05:23 It was just to create this place of deep stillness.
00:05:25 And he seems to have had a 10% success rate in curing cancer.
00:05:29 When this was presented to people, was it presented as if you do this, it will have
00:05:37 an impact on, positive impact on your cancer?
00:05:41 That was sort of the stated goal.
00:05:45 I know that while they were doing the meditation, they were not to focus on that in their mind.
00:05:50 I think though that he became known at the time for this technique that was helping some
00:05:55 people cure cancer.
00:05:56 So the implication is if you do this calming and observing technique.
00:06:01 It may happen.
00:06:02 What I would say is that, and I know that there's some other methods, one that I think
00:06:07 you don't think very highly of where you try to visualize like Pac-Man eating up the...
00:06:13 Yes.
00:06:14 And in fact, Dr. Mears, one of his patients shrank her tumor by doing his technique about
00:06:21 becoming completely still and quiet and relaxed.

00:06:25 And he advised his patients to practice for an hour or two a day, actually.

00:06:30 It was a long period of time.

00:06:32 By the way, that is a significant point.

00:06:34 Yes.

00:06:35 We're talking about a quick fix, trivial.

00:06:39 But you want a significant change, you may have to put in a significant time and energy.

00:06:45 And one of his patients practiced his technique, shrank her tumor, and then tried the Simonton

00:06:50 technique of actually visualizing the cancer shrinking, visualizing the white blood cells

00:06:55 attacking the cancer cells.

00:06:56 Eating it like Pac-Man.

00:06:57 And while she did that, the tumor came back.

00:07:00 And then she abandoned that technique upon his recommendation, went back to the stilling,

00:07:04 quieting technique, and the tumor shrank again.

00:07:06 So that's a very interesting case.

00:07:09 Very good.

00:07:10 When we look at the range of things out there, very often what will be talked about is, okay,

00:07:18 if you focus in this way, it's going to cure your cancer or it's likely to cure

00:07:25 your cancer or it's going to help bring an objective change in the situation.

00:07:31 So I would consider that to be one basic model.

00:07:39 There's another paradigm, another way to look at things, that complements that and can be

00:07:48 used in parallel or perhaps in lieu of this, what we're talking about.

00:07:56 The other paradigm says, my interest in learning this meditation technique is primarily to

00:08:06 reduce the suffering that I experience due to this situation.

00:08:12 And it may or may not have an objective impact, but it has a high probability of reducing

00:08:23 the suffering, whether it has an objective impact or not.

00:08:27 I think both approaches are equally valid.

00:08:30 But my sort of go-to approach personally, if I have to teach one or the other, is I'm

00:08:36 going to teach you ways of focusing that will reduce your suffering.

00:08:40 The reason for that is several fold.

00:08:46 First, in a lot of the models that you and I talked about, the claim is that in fact

00:08:56 the objective condition of the cancer has been caused by mental or emotional distress.

00:09:05 That's a claim.

00:09:06 I'm not going to comment on the validity of that claim, but that's commonly believed

00:09:12 and even in standard medicine.

00:09:13 Certainly it can be a contributing cause, maybe not the whole cause.

00:09:17 I believe I could be wrong about this, but I think that the official position of the

00:09:22 AMA, the American Medical Association, is that mental and emotional factors weigh in,

00:09:29 in one way or another.

00:09:31 And that's established medicine.

00:09:35 To whatever extent the objective situation is actually the result of suffering—mental,

00:09:43 emotional, what have you—to that extent, if we reduce suffering, then there'll be

00:09:50 an impact on the objective situation.