

The Dharma Name 'Shinzen' ~ Shinzen Young

00:00:00 Okay, so that's how you write my name in Japanese, which is Chinese. Chinese read in the Japanese
00:00:21 pronunciation. The Sino-Japanese readings are Xin Zhen, but in standard Mandarin Chinese,
00:00:31 the characters are pronounced Zhen Shan. In Sino-Korean, it would be Chin Sun, and in
00:00:40 Sino-Vietnamese, it would be Zhen Tian. Written the same, means the same, but pronounced differently
00:00:49 depending on the region of East Asia. What happens is when you become a Buddhist monk,
00:00:56 they give you a Dharma name, just like if you become a Christian monk or a nun, you
00:01:02 get like a religious name. So my teacher, before he made me a Buddhist monk in 1970,
00:01:12 just before the ceremony, he came up to me with this slip of paper and he said, this
00:01:18 is the Dharma name I'm going to give you, and I want you to use it, keep it, make it
00:01:25 your name that you'll use for the rest of your life, but I want to know, are you okay
00:01:31 with this name? So I look at the piece of paper and I pretty much freak out. See, written
00:01:43 Chinese jumps off the page if you can read it, because it's iconic and it's graphic.
00:01:51 So it's like Chin means authentic or true, and Zhen means good or goodness. It's like
00:02:01 authenticity, truth and goodness. As I'm looking at it, I say, truth and goodness? I could
00:02:10 never live up to that name. So I said, I'm afraid I'll namae make, namae make in Japanese
00:02:22 means I won't be able to live up to the name. And he said, never mind that, is it okay?
00:02:29 Are you willing to take this name? I said, well, I guess so. So hence the name. What
00:02:38 he meant to convey to me was many levels of meaning simultaneously, as is possible with
00:02:46 the Chinese characters. On one hand, he was saying, I'm sort of giving you

the whole lineage

00:02:59 to take back to the United States, because the Zhen, by the way, this is not the Zen

00:03:05 of Zen Buddhism. There's a good example. See, it's a completely different character. I'll

00:03:10 show you the Zen of Zen Buddhism in a minute. The Zhen is part of his name. His name was

00:03:16 Zen Kyo, meaning good teaching. The Shin was the name of the prince, imperial prince, who

00:03:27 founded the temple where I lived, or where we lived, on Mount Koya. It was a thousand

00:03:36 years old. And Prince Shin-yo, written with this, was a son of an emperor who started

00:03:46 this particular site on Mount Koya about a thousand years ago. So he's giving me the

00:03:53 name of the guy that started the temple a thousand years ago, the first character of

00:03:58 that. And he's giving me the first character of his own name, sort of saying, OK, here's

00:04:03 a thousand years of lineage to carry back to the United States.

00:04:09 Now in addition to the intrinsic meaning, there's all this other level of responsibility

00:04:17 and et cetera. Prince Shin-yo, S-H-I-N-N-Y-O, you can look it up in the Wikipedia. Very

00:04:28 interesting person. He was the first Japanese. We're talking ninth century AD, so over a

00:04:36 thousand years ago. He was the first Japanese to attempt to leave Japan and visit the Western

00:04:44 world. Many, many Japanese for centuries had gone to Korea and China itself to study. But

00:04:56 because the lineage of practice is Shingon, and that is an Indic lineage, the lineage

00:05:05 I was originally ordained in, that's Vajrayana actually, Prince Shin-yo in essence wanted

00:05:13 to go back to the source itself. He wanted to go to India to study directly with Indic

00:05:20 masters rather than secondhand with Chinese or Koreans.

00:05:25 India is the West from the East Asian point of view. He never made it though. You have

00:05:33 to realize in the ninth century, even to travel to China from Japan was to take your life

00:05:43 in your hands because the seas are very rough and it's just dangerous. So it

was actually

00:05:51 a pretty outrageous notion to be able to travel, given the primitive and dangerous conditions

00:06:00 and the unknown conditions, to be able to travel from Japan to India. Indeed, it was

00:06:09 not feasible. He was killed in the Singapore area, Malaysia area, never got any further.

00:06:21 Anyway, just a little bit of history. But then there's another whole level of meaning,

00:06:27 which is this represents the twin pillars of the universal spiritual path around the

00:06:39 world because the truth or the authenticity piece, that stands in the Buddhist tradition

00:06:50 for the wisdom. In the Taoist tradition, somebody who had realized the Tao, who had transcended

00:07:05 the somethingness of self and the materiality of the world, such a person was referred to

00:07:11 as a zhenren. That's the Taoist term for an enlightened master. Very simple, authentic

00:07:22 person. This implies sort of get over yourself in the world. The shan is ordinary goodness

00:07:33 in the sense of a mensch, a good person. It's improvement, both in terms of improving your

00:07:41 shila, your personal character, and in terms of improving the world through bodhisattva

00:07:52 service is implied by this character. So an ordinary good person, what we might colloquially

00:07:59 call in North American English a mensch from the Yiddish, is called a zhenren. So what

00:08:07 he was basically saying is like, I give you a name that exemplifies the essence of the

00:08:15 path.