

Meditation: Escaping Into Life

An Interview with Shinzen Young by Michael Toms

Michael Toms: I think the image, particularly in the United States, that many Americans have of monastic life - especially in Japan or Asia - is that it is quite rigorous. It's very challenging to adopt such a lifestyle in the beginning.

Shinzen Young: Yes, it is rigorous, but fortunately it's also unnecessary! Nowadays, you can find short, user-friendly retreats just about everywhere in North America. My personal mission in life is to figure out new ways of doing the practice, which are suited to this culture, so that people can get really significant experiences without going to "Buddhist boot camp." So far, the results have been encouraging.

MT: So you came back from Japan to the United States, and you decided not to live in Japan any longer. Was there a particular reason for that? Or did you just want to come back home?

SY: The whole point of monastic training is not to learn to be comfortable in a monastery, but to learn to be comfortable anywhere. My first teacher kept a picture by his desk. It was entitled "Buddha Leaving the Mountain." It was an important icon for him. He emphasized to me that the ultimate expression of what I was learning in the monastery would be to return to ordinary life and interact with people in service. I had spent the first half of my life trying to become as Asian as possible. The technology of internal exploration known as meditation represents the pinnacle of Asian culture, its crowning achievement and greatest contribution to the culture of the world. Having encountered that pinnacle, I no longer needed to do the Asia trip. I wanted to come back home and spend the second half of my life making meditation as Western as possible.

MT: If you were to tell us a story that would best capture essentials of your first teacher, what would that story be?

SY: Just before I was to be ordained as a monk, the abbot approached me with a piece of paper. "This is the homyo (dharma name) I am considering for you. Do you think it's okay?" he asked. On the paper, starkly calligraphed, were two Chinese characters pronounced Shinzen in Japanese. Shin means truth, and zen (which is not the same character as in Zen Buddhism), means goodness. I was stunned, because I immediately grasped the significance of the two characters. They stood for the two essential elements that comprised any really mature spiritual path. I stammered something like: "It's beautiful, but I doubt I can live up to it." He continued: "That may be, but are you okay with it as your name?" I said, "Sure." So he gave me a name that would always remind me of the basics. That was 30 years ago.

In the Buddhist tradition, the word truth implies insight, clear experiential knowledge of the effortless impersonal process that underlies all our experiences. Through insight, one learns to consciously participate in that process. When you do so, to a certain extent, you transcend the human condition, go beyond your limited personal identity. But this alone does not constitute a complete spiritual path. Goodness is also needed. Goodness implies the ability to manifest a personal self engaged with one's fellow beings. Goodness finds its

ultimate expression in a life of effortless service. To transcend the human condition, to improve the human condition, and to understand the complementary relationship between these two - this is the essence, this is our basic job. Liberating insight without service is spiritually narrow. On the other hand, attempting to help people without at least some tools of transcendence leaves one susceptible to burnout and distortions in behavior.

But I am afraid all this may sound somewhat abstract. Let me try to make it more tangible.

Like a precious diamond, liberating insight has many facets. One of these facets is knowing how to pass through the unavoidable physical and emotional pain of life, really feel it, and yet not suffer because of it. The concept of pain without suffering may seem like an oxymoron. Does it hurt? Yes! Does that eclipse the perfection of the moment? No! In fact, it is the perfection of the moment.

It is of the utmost importance to understand the difference between pain and suffering. When you understand this, your sense of security is no longer dependent on the vagaries of circumstance. Furthermore, when you understand the difference between pain and suffering, you understand the difference between being motivated by feelings and being driven by them. And you understand how to be deeply empathetic without getting your energy drained.

Suffering is a function of two variables: pain itself and the resistance to the pain. By resistance, I mean interference with the natural flow pattern of the pain. Unfortunately, resistance starts deep within the pre-conscious processing of the nervous system.

Thus, by the time we are consciously aware of a wave of pain, it has already been congealed into a mass of suffering. That is why pain is equated with suffering by most people.

But suffering equals pain multiplied by resistance (roughly speaking). This is true whether the pain is physical, or something emotional like anger, sadness, fear, embarrassment, or remorse. If you consistently apply this insight to various types of pain, the habit of resistance gets trained away at progressively deeper levels of neural processing. Eventually, you are able to have the literally earth-shaking experience of pure pain. Pure pain is pain unmixed with resistance. Pure pain causes little suffering, no matter how intense it may be. Moreover, pure pain purifies. Its energy kneads the substance of your soul, working out the kinks and lumps for you.

Pure pain purifies, but suffering makes a person brittle and dehumanized. Those who follow the path of self-mortification need to be very clear about this point.

Of course, everything that I have said about pain is also true of pleasure in a converse sort of way. Suffering is directly proportional to how much we resist against the pain. Satisfaction is inversely proportional to how much we grasp on to the pleasure. The less we grasp the flow of pleasure, the greater the satisfaction derived from it. And of course, pure pleasure purifies.

So, one facet of insight relates to learning how to experience pleasure and pain in a radically new way. But how is this actually done? Well, you develop focus power through meditation practice. This allows you, upon occasion, to so fully affirm the moment-by-moment reality of an experience that you have no time left to

congeal that experience into a rigid object, and no space left to maintain a sense of self, separate from the experience. You and the experience disappear into completeness. It's everything and nothing at the same time: "Todo y nada," as St. John of the Cross put it. So, one facet of liberating insight involves learning how to diminish suffering and elevate satisfaction through having complete experiences of pleasure and pain. Another facet involves the ability to have a complete experience of your whole self, the feeling/thinking ego, your limited identity. When you have a complete experience of feeling/thinking self, you become free from it. You so fully affirm the moment-by-moment experience of self-consciousness that you have no time left to congeal that self-consciousness into an object extended in time and space. Everything that is contractive in yourself collapses inward toward a dimensionless point. Everything that is expansive in yourself dissipates outward toward infinity. You embrace all of creation from within and without. The two fundamental forces of nature (expansion and contraction) separate, tearing apart the very fabric of the self. The self dissolves back into those forces and becomes them. Then, because there is no solidified self lodged between them, the forces of expansion and contraction can directly touch each other. They commingle and cancel each other out. There are then no force waves to stir time, space, self, or world into existence. There is only true peace, the peace that passeth understanding.

By having such experiences many, many times, one learns to perceive all of creation as not fundamentally separate from one's self. Love, compassion, and the desire to serve arise spontaneously. So this brings us to service, goodness, the second essential of the spiritual path. Just as insight has many facets, so also with service. I would like to talk about just one aspect, an aspect that the Dalai Lama emphasizes a lot -compassion.

Compassion is practiced in two ways: subtly and overtly. You can subtly serve any person with whom you interact by allowing their poison and pain to resonate deeply within you, and experiencing it completely so that it does not turn into suffering within you. This is the healthy alternative to both callous indifference and enervating enmeshment.

This subtle service is a natural extension of the self-liberation process. You purified your own pain by willingly experiencing it with mindfulness and equanimity. Now, in daily interaction, you open yourself up to other people's pain. But you apply mindfulness and equanimity to it as it resonates within you. By experiencing another person's pain in this liberated way, you are subtly, subliminally helping them to do the same. People want to have you around, but they cannot say exactly why. The reason is that your body is constantly preaching a wordless sermon to everybody you interact with, even casually. It's deeply fulfilling to share (com) the pain (passion), but not share the suffering.

Subtle is significant, but we must also serve in a more overt, tangible way. The form that this overt service takes depends on our personal interests and abilities and on the norms of the culture in which we live. For some, it's expressed in how they raise their families. For others, it will take the form of social action or helping professions. Some may express it through the use of special powers, such as the ability to heal. For many, overt service takes the form of teaching and supporting people's spiritual practice.

So, my first teacher conveyed the entire richness of the path in the two characters he chose to name me with.

MT: You mentioned suffering. As you were describing the qualities of your teacher and what he taught you, it reminded me of that Thomas Merton quote -- about how he entered the monastery to practice suffering more effectively.

SY: Yes, I use that quote all the time in my retreats. I don't remember it exactly, either, but I think it was something like: "I didn't become a monk to suffer more than other people. I became a monk to suffer more effectively." People often don't understand what he meant by that. It's actually quite a profound statement. What it means is that physical or psychological discomfort in and of itself does not have to turn into suffering. There's another factor. I call that factor the degree of one's skill at feeling. It's an interesting concept. That feeling is a skill. This skill can either be developed or not. Most people do not have it very highly developed, unfortunately. That leads to big problems like injustice, exploitation, abuse, war, and genocide. People wonder why these things happen. I believe they happen because we don't take time to cultivate skill at feeling. Skill at feeling means, well, let me give a tangible example. What kind of feeling would you like me to talk about? It's the same for every kind of feeling.

MT: Anger.

SY: Let's say you turn on the television and you see something that angers you. You say, "I'm really angry." We can perceive that experience of anger more precisely. What do we really mean when we say "I'm angry"? As you know, I'm interested in mathematics and science. One of the things mathematicians are always trying to do is called analysis or decomposition. They try to take a complex process and break it down into its components so that they can get a handle on it. Well, one way to analyze the experience of anger (or any negative emotion, for that matter) is to see that it consists of two components. If we can keep track of these two components, we can handle our emotions much better. One component is a sequence of thoughts in your mind - internal conversations and internal images. The other component is a sequence of feelings in your body - body sensations. What we call an emotion is a tangling together of thought and feeling. If we can untangle these components as the emotion is happening, keep track of them, know what part is thought and what part is feeling, we discover that the emotion causes much less suffering. Suffering drives and distorts one's behavior, creating big problems in the objective world. In other words, if you can bring enough mindfulness and acceptance to a negative emotion as it is happening, it ceases to cause suffering. Yet, where has it gone? You haven't run away from it. You've merely experienced it with extraordinary clarity. You've escaped into it.

MT: So we haven't run away from it; we've escaped into it.

SY: Exactly! If I were required to give a "quick and dirty" definition of meditation, it would be that meditation is the practice of escaping into life. It's escape in the sense that one does not feel limited by the mind/body process or the surrounding situation. But, the direction of escape is not from what's happening, but rather into it.

This is very challenging. It's challenging to understand, and it's challenging to do. The experience of escaping into something is totally different from merely being passionately involved in it. When we ingenuously try to describe this experience, it comes out sounding like we are playing with words, fabricating paradoxes to shock or impress people. Escaping into something simply means having a radically complete experience of it. A radically complete

experience is rich and fulfilling, but it is also empty and transparent. I sometimes say that we Buddhists are our own worst public relations representatives because our vocabulary seems designed to turn people off. You know, we are always talking about emptiness, no self, void.

MT: Nothingness.

SY: Yes, but the nothingness of the mystic is a very special kind of nothingness. The nihil of Meister Eckhart is not the nihil of nihilism. The nada of St. John of the Cross is not "nada." Nothingness is a terminus technicus, a well-defined technical term in the vocabulary of world mysticism.

Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and Taoism differ radically in their beliefs and customs. Yet, the mystics who represent the core of these traditions often speak of the Spiritual Source as a special kind of nothing. Historically, this can only partially be explained as the result of mutual influences. Despite what some New Age books would have you believe, these formulations arose independently in India, China, and the West before there was significant contact. So, we are faced with some fascinating questions. Why should they agree on such a counter-intuitive (if not downright offensive) description of God when they disagree in so many other areas? And furthermore, why does the mystic's description of the awesome creative power of nothingness sound so similar to contemporary theories of cosmology and quantum physics? Is it coincidence or convergence?

As a person of Jewish ancestry, I find it deeply satisfying that the description of God's creative activity as it appears in the Kabbalah is remarkably parallel to that of my present teacher Joshu Sasaki Roshi, contemporary Japanese Zen Master. The goal of Jewish meditation is to experience Bria'ah yesh me ayn. In Hebrew: Bria'ah (the creation) yesh (of things) me (from) ayn (nothing). Ayn is synonymous with Ha Makom, the Source, i.e., God. Moreover, in Kabbalah, creation is conceived as happening continuously. God literally loves us into existence each moment through the oscillating interplay of hesed (expansion) and gevurah (contraction).

Physicists speak of the creative power of quantum fluctuations of the void. This seems remarkably similar to the descriptions of mystics, especially Buddhist mystics. At the very least, it provides us with some wonderful metaphors. The enlightened people of the world can now stand up and say, "I know that what I'm trying to describe to you sounds weird and paradoxical, but it's not any weirder than these widely accepted theories of science, and as a matter of fact, it's rather similar to them."

MT: Like not being able to tell the difference between the part and the wave.

SY: Yes, the concept of wave-particle complementarity is extremely useful in explaining certain aspects of meditative experience. The basic idea behind complementarity is that objects can be looked upon either as waves or particles. "Particle" does not necessarily imply "small." Any chunk of matter is a particle—a bowling ball, or the earth itself. Associated with every particle is its wave function.

When you think about it, it's absolutely astonishing, because particles and waves seem to be so fundamentally different. Particles are rigid and separate—two billiard balls recoil if they collide. Waves are bending and interactive—two water waves immediately merge upon contact. Particles have established boundaries and fixed

centers. Waves expand and contract. A particle retains scratches and is vulnerable to shattering force. If you attempt to scratch or shatter a wave, it simply digests the energy of the attack into itself.

The practical implication of complementarity lies in the fact that some applications work better from the wave perspective, while other applications work better from the particle perspective. The issue boils down to knowing which perspective is appropriate, and the fact that the engineer always has the freedom to choose either one.

Spiritual freedom is very much like this. For some life applications, we must congeal the mind and body into a separate particular person—for example, when you need to figure stuff out or negotiate a contract. The problem is that most people are limited to the particulate perspective only. They are unable to immediately switch to the undulatory paradigm when they encounter situations that work better with the wave self. What situations are those? Well, let me give you just a few representative examples: enjoying a morsel of food, experiencing bereavement, making love, being embarrassed in public, and praying.

Once again, the issue here is freedom - freedom to adopt the most appropriate perspective. If you cannot dissolve into a wave, you are missing out on a lot of life. Naturally, death is frightening. Indeed, there are human experiences for which the wave self is not only appropriate, but absolutely essential. To attempt to pass through these experiences while maintaining a separate particulate self causes unspeakable suffering. Acute physical or emotional pain, chronic pain, and, of course, death itself, are in this category.

MT: I'd like to focus for a moment on thoughts, because I think there's a key here. I recall Krishnamurti talking about thoughts being from the past. They're always from the past. They're never from the present. There's this idea in Buddhism that thoughts are just another sense gate, like hearing, seeing, smelling, tasting, and body sensation.

SY: Yes, absolutely, a sense mode.

MT: But there's this other image that thoughts are bad. That somehow we have to go beyond the thoughts. What about that dichotomy? On the one hand, thoughts are just another sense, and on the other hand, thoughts are the enemy of meditation.

SY: The problem is not thinking, per se, but the fact that thinking is subject to so much drivenness, fixation, and lack of clarity. In fact, spiritual wisdom is just ordinary thought, functioning without being driven by the need for answers!

The Buddhist tradition analyzes the meditation process into two aspects: calming and clarifying. But there is no real clear-cut distinction between these two; it is more a matter of emphasis. If you emphasize the calming aspect of meditation, then you may try to pull away from thought, weaken its grasp, cool it out. There are numerous strategies for achieving this. For example, you can count your breaths or focus on a mantra or visualize a small disc of light, etc.

If you emphasize the clarifying aspect of meditation, then you might actually take thought itself as your object of meditation. This means that you analyze thought into its components as they arise and observe these

components with a hands-off attitude. In this case, you have no particular agenda to control or quiet the thinking process.

Thought arises through internal speech (verbal thinking) and internal images (visual thinking). In each instant, your conscious thinking process must involve one or both of these components. At this moment, is your thinking process visual, verbal, or both? If visual, look through the images, not at them. If the images persist, fine, continue to look through them and be aware; does the rate of transition from image to image remain constant or speed up or slow down? If the image dies away as soon as you notice it, fine, but be clear; is the internal screen then completely blank or is there some "snow" or subtle stirring on it? If it's the former, enjoy the peacefulness of the blank screen. Abide there, ready to detect the first buds of the next visual thought. If it's the latter, carefully watch those remnant movement qualities. Give them permission to speed up or slow down. You are now literally observing the energy envelope of your unconscious mind as it processes!

If the thought arises as internal conversation, fine, listen to the words as just so many sounds, like listening to birds chirping. Be clear: Is it your voice or someone else's voice that's talking in your head? Is the speech coming in complete sentences, short phrases, or individual words? Is the loudness and speed of that internal voice constant, or does it fluctuate? If the internal words die away as soon as you notice them, fine. If they persist, that's fine, too; just listen with detachment. When the words die away, are your "internal loud speakers" completely silent, or is there some remnant "tape hiss"? If there is no activity whatsoever in your internal loudspeakers, then continuously listen to the peacefulness and enjoy it. If there is some subtle remnant of activity, let it flow. It represents subconscious verbal processing.

By working with thought in this way, eventually you'll come to the literally earth-shaking experience of complete thinking. Thought ceases to be a thing and breaks up into an energy wave. You become so fascinated with the moment-by-moment movement qualities of thought that you are no longer caught up in its meanings. Put another way, every thought that is experienced completely has the same meaning. The meaning is release and purification of consciousness!

So, this is the process of clarifying thought. Thought first becomes clear in the sense that its components can be discriminated distinctly. At the culmination of this discrimination process, thinking becomes so clear that it literally becomes transparent and is no longer in the way.

MT: How does all this relate to the Buddhist concept of "aniccha"?

SY: Aniccha means impermanence in Pali, the language of the early Buddhist texts. Remember how I said that we Buddhists tend to use "negative vocabulary"? In early Buddhism, the concept of aniccha was closely linked to the concept of dukkha, the suffering nature of existence. Everything is constantly changing, passing. Even when we seem to experience comfort and stability, we are constantly being goaded by subtle change at a microscopic level. And at the macroscopic level, we live under a sword of Damocles because everything that we depend on for fulfillment will pass—perhaps sooner, perhaps later.

All this is certainly true, but there is much, much more to impermanence than this pessimistic philosophy! As our meditation experiences grow, we begin to become intimate with the flow patterns of impermanence: how it

expands, contracts, circulates, and vibrates through all six senses and at all scales of time and space. Once you can detect the natural flow of your senses, you can learn to yield to that flow. Then suffering goes away and is replaced by the joy of purification, the joy of complete experience, and the joy of participating in God's creative process. Impermanence becomes an ally.

At first, you meditate on impermanence, but eventually you are meditated by impermanence. The flow of impermanence massages the substance of your soul. This aspect of impermanence relates to what in Western religion is called acquiring the Holy Spirit, and to what in Chinese medicine is called activating qi (ch'i). It is a kind of inner peristalsis that breaks up and digests experience, absorbing what is nutritive, and excreting what is toxic. You can literally feel the poison and pain within you being churned to the surface and evaporating away. This is called "the joy of purification."

I have tried to describe to you how, when you experience anything completely, it presents its wave nature. It becomes anicca. You stay with that wave, instant by instant, as it dies away into the abundant nothingness of God. All the richness of the experience has been digested into the wave, and all the energy of the wave gets stored in the nothingness. Thus, impermanence marks the path to completeness and to the true peace of God. Other paths to nothingness may lead to nihilism, confusion, and despair. It's interesting how in Hebrew, peace (shalom) and completeness (shalem) are closely related.

Impermanence also marks the path from nothingness back to somethingness. Inevitably, nothingness, zero, re-polarizes into plus and minus, expansion and contraction. You experience yourself and your surrounding scene being gestated into existence within the vibrating folds of God's formless womb. Once again, you have an individual particulate self. But you understand it in a radically new way! You know for sure whence you come, whither you will return, and within what you always abide.

MT: Shinzen, our readers may want to move in the direction you're suggesting. What might be a first step?

SY: I would say that the most important thing is to find a support structure for your practice and a group with which you can do regular sitting retreats. Don't be too concerned with searching for the perfect cosmic guru. But you will probably need a coach, someone with deep meditation experience who also has good communication skills. Spiritual bookstores are good places to go for information networking. See what is available in your area and which approach to meditation appeals to you.