

See Your Thoughts as Strange

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Try and settle into the body, the body as you feel it from within, what the texts call “form.” And try to find a sense of pleasure here. Explore the breath to see how it feels, and adjust it so that it feels just right: not too long, not too short, too deep, too shallow, too heavy, too light. When the breath feels good, try to notice where there’s a sense of ease and think of it spreading around the body—like a liquid that can seep through all the little nooks and crannies of the body—and allow your awareness to follow it. Or if you want, you can spread the awareness out there first and then think of the breath following the awareness. The important thing is that you try to fill the body with a sense of well-being. Fill it with your awareness. And then as for any thoughts that go out into the world, out into your visual field or your aural field, just let them go. Try to have a sense that you belong here. This is normalcy.

The Thai ajaans talk about the mind settled in, at ease, at equanimity, as the normal state of mind, or the mind at normalcy—in the same way as when you’re observing the precepts, they say that your behavior is finally at normalcy. But for most of us, that’s not our sense of normal. Distraction is our normalcy. And the desires that flow along with that distraction out into the sensory realm: That’s where we normally are.

One of the points of meditation is to change your sense of normal. This is one of the reasons why we leave the activity, say, of a city, the activity of even little towns or farms, and come to a quiet place like this. Because when you’re staying out there, the way everybody else is behaving seems normal, but here you want to be able to pull out and say, “Is that really normal?”

It’s good to get out and have a sense of society being strange. Right now it’s especially strange, but even when society seems to be relatively normal, going its ordinary way, from the point of view of the Dhamma, it’s still strange: people going along with their defilements. As Ajaan Mun used to say, whatever culture there is in the world, it’s a culture of people with defilements. There’s only one culture that’s not, and that’s the culture of the noble ones, and the noble ones don’t think like other people do. We need to learn how to see their thinking as normal if we’re going to learn how to benefit from their teachings, so that when thoughts of, say, sensuality come up, sensual desire or anger, you want to see them as strange.

This is one of the reasons why we have the contemplation of the body. You can think of all the pleasures that revolve around the body, and yet look what you've got when you take the body apart. You look at a diagram of the inside of the body, and it's very bizarre. If you were to take all the different organs out and put them on the floor, you'd run away. They'd be so strange. And yet when they're all sewed up nicely inside, you can look at a human body and actually want it. You can look at your own body in the mirror, and it seems normal. It seems okay.

So there's an incongruity here, and the contemplation of the body, as with all the other contemplations that deal with our defilements, is meant to show how incongruous our desires are. We have to turn a blind eye to so many things in order to stoke our greed, stoke our lust, stoke our anger, and put the mind into what the Buddha would say is an abnormal state. Yet for us, that's the spice of life. So we have to learn how to change our views. This is one of the reasons why we try to develop this sense of well-being in the body as our refuge. Because as the Buddha points out, if we didn't have any other alternative to pain, we'd just go for nothing but sensuality, because that's the only other option that's out there for finding some pleasure.

So it's important that you find a strong sense of pleasure simply sitting here in the body, as it's felt from inside. That's a part of your awareness that our culture tends to block off. We don't have much of a vocabulary to describe the body as it feels from within. All the interesting things in the world seem to be happening out there, where our vocabulary is huge. And yet actually we're in here, and it's unnatural for us to be pulled out there so much. So get back in touch with your body as it feels from within, and learn how to relate to it in a way that's balanced.

Some people, especially if they've had a lot of suppressed emotions in the past, will find that weird energies move in different directions in the body and get stuck in different parts. You have to think of everything opening up, all the channels open, open, open. Any excess energy can flow out the palms of the hands, the soles of the feet. If something's stuck in your head, think of it going out the eyes, the ears, or down through the throat. In other words, learn how to have a sense that you can be with the sense of the body and not push it in strange directions. Learn how to compensate for bad habits you may have developed subconsciously in the past around the energy flow in the body, and keep compensating until things feel balanced. Then tell yourself: "This is normalcy." As for your thoughts that pull you out, learn to look at them as strange.

As the Buddha said, discernment comes down to seeing things as other, as separate. Yet we live in our thought-worlds, we let them envelope us, and for us they're normal. Your desires, your angers are very much yours. If we could take

everybody's thoughts and put them out in a lineup, you'd probably be able to pick out your thoughts very quickly. There's a certain you-ness to your thoughts, and again that seems normal. It's one of the reasons why we go for them—and we keep going for them, again and again and again.

But stop and think: In all the many lifetimes you've had, you've been many different kinds of people with lots of different ideas about what's beautiful, what's ugly, what's fair, what's not fair. And that's just counting your times as a human being. You've probably been other types of beings as well. Different genders, different races, different species: We've been through all of them. And each time, it was "me," "my" thoughts, "my" ideas, "my" taste of things, "my" desires. But just think about what you were like maybe two hundred years ago and how strange that would be. Well, learn to look at yourself right now as strange, especially your thoughts, so that you can have a much more solid sense of feeling at home here, belonging here with your breath, and see anything that would pull you away as alien.

It's like learning a different language or going to a different country. At first, you're struck by how strange that language is and how strange that country is, but if you stay there long enough, get fluent enough at the language and live with the customs, it becomes more normal. And then you come back home, and home seems strange. Well, that's precisely the attitude you should learn around your thoughts. They really are strange. The fact that you would desire something, the fact that you would have lust for something, the things that get you angry: If you can see them as strange, it's easier to pull out of them.

Otherwise, you live in them. They become a becoming, a whole world in which you take on an identity, and these states of becoming are what cause us to suffer. They require feeding, and the feeding requires suffering. In fact, the Buddha's word for clinging, which he identifies with suffering, can also mean to feed. You take on this identity where you have to feed. It means you've got to suffer.

So any craving that would pull you in that direction, you've got to see that as strange, as alien. Otherwise, you go for it again and again and again. Learn to see your thoughts as strange. See the mind centered here in the body with a sense of balance, as normal. That puts everything else in the right perspective.