

Normalcy

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When we read about other people's meditation experiences, we tend to like to read about the really dramatic ones: The meditator's awareness leaves his body, and goes wandering around, sees all kinds of visions. Or a meditator discovers a sense of oneness with everything she sees. Everything is beautiful, luminous. These things sound very impressive, something we'd like to try too. But you have to look a little further into their stories, and you realize that those kinds of extreme experiences are things that have to be remedied. They're problems. They actually get in the way of the goal. When meditators have experiences like that, their teachers—if they have a good meditation teacher—will say, “Okay, you've got to get over that; you've got to get past that. The weird stuff is not what it's all about.”

Here it's good to remember two things. One: *Sila*, ordinarily translated as “virtue,” is one of the requisites for meditation. *Sila* also means normalcy. You're trying to develop a state of normalcy in your actions, where you're not deviating from harmless behavior. You're not going off into extremes of harmful behavior because you're trying to establish a pattern that will carry into your meditation. You want to keep the mind in a state of normalcy as well, where it's not going to the extremes.

Why do we tend to fall into extremes? In some cases it's because we want a larger sense of self. We're tired of being finite people and want a taste of the infinite. In others, we want to annihilate ourselves. We become one with the tree so that the tree can take over. We become one with the wall so that the wall can take over. We want to blot out our experience of who we are and who we've been. Or we push ourselves into extremes with the idea if we just push a little bit harder, we'll get over the hump and into jhana, into the transcendent. But these things don't come from pushing. As Ajaan Fuang once said, if we could get our way into nibbana by pushing, everybody would have pushed their way in there by now. The mind likes to push and pull. It's much harder to settle into a state of normalcy where there's no pushing or pulling, but if you want to get solid results, that's where you have to aim.

The second point to remember is that we're practicing the middle way. We're trying to stay away from extremes of eternalism, where you expand to become one with the universe around you, and annihilation, where you want yourself to be annihilated, say, as a little drop of water that gets totally swallowed up by the ocean. Instead, we're trying to find a place where you can stand in the middle, in a state of normalcy. The mind isn't going up, isn't going down. It's just right here. But it's very solidly right here, very clearly right here. We're looking for the clarity. We're not trying to put ourselves into trances. The texts do contain descriptions of trance states, but those are largely in the commentaries and they're dangerous things to play with. You get your mind into all kinds of weird situations, weird perceptions, extreme perceptions. Then you've got to get yourself out, because that's not where you're going—at least not where you're going if you're going anywhere sane, anywhere safe.

So when you catch the mind trying to push itself into an unusual state, pull back. Remind yourself that that's not the middle path. We're not here to push; we're not here to pull. We're here to settle down. If your mind has a natural tendency to go in those directions, you've got to learn how to remedy it. When it's going there simply because you want to try something weird, unusual, and new in your meditation, you've got to say, wait a minute, wherever you get you're going to have to pull yourself back, so why bother going? You want to be right

here, with a sense of ease, a sense of normalcy, observing what Ajaan Lee calls the precepts of the mind.

For example, there's the precept against killing. Okay, try not to kill this state of just being normal in the present moment. The precept against stealing: Don't try to steal other people's meditation experiences and make them your own. The precept against illicit sex: Don't try to become one with everything around you. The precept against lies: Don't try to hoodwink yourself into thinking that these states are special. And the precept against intoxicants: Don't try to intoxicate yourself with a trance state. You want to be normal, clear. Otherwise, how are you going to see things for what they are?

Sometimes you read that in the stages of insight you get into weird psychophysical experiences. Those descriptions are designed by people who are trying to sell a particular kind of meditation. You're going off to spend a week where you want to have something to show for it, something you can talk about when you return. It's hard to tell your friends, "You know, I maintained my mind in a state of normalcy for the entire week." It doesn't impress anybody. But you're not here to impress people; you're not here to impress yourself. You're here to see things clearly. The best way to see things clearly is to get the mind into a state of stillness.

We tend to think of the stages of jhana as very strong trance states, but actually they're the mind in a state of genuine normalcy where it's very perceptive, very clearly perceiving things as they are, as they come as they go, able to see distinctions. That's what we're working on, trying to keep the mind in a state of normalcy, as with all the elements of the path. The qualities of the path are things we've already experienced, things we've already tasted. It's simply that we haven't seen the strength they can develop if they're made continuous, if they're made all-around. This state of centered, clear normalcy in the mind, if you could really maintain it, would build up a lot of strength.

To do this, you develop a sense of the observer in concentration where you're able to just watch things come and go. Like Ajaan Chah's example of the monkey. If you don't really understand monkeys, you become a monkey too. When the monkey jumps around, your mind jumps around with the monkey. But what we're trying to do here is to stay in a state of normalcy where the monkey jumps, but we don't jump. We know it's jumping, but we're not jumping along with it. And even though this is a fabricated state of stillness and equanimity, still it's part of the path—because, after all, the entire path is a fabrication.

So we are not trying to induce special experiences. Sometimes they may happen and then the question will be: When they happen, what you do with them? How to get yourself back to normalcy?

But if they're not happening on their own, don't try to induce them. You try to develop a state of normalcy where the mind can stay still and calm in the face of what it likes, in the face of what it doesn't like. If that sounds too dull, we may want to try to force something unusual, like obliterating all distinctions between subject and object. But look carefully at that desire. There may be a strong but subtle sense of aversion underlying it, or a strong but subtle sense of passion. It's not the way of the path. Those passions and aversions are the things you've got to learn how to see and uproot.

So when you find your mind leaning in those directions, remind yourself that this is not the path. You're leaning off to one side or another. When you're on the path, you're trying to stay on the middle way right here. It may not seem very impressive. But again, we're not here to impress anybody; we're here to see things clearly. And the strength of the path doesn't come from pushing things. It comes from allowing the state of normalcy to get

constant. You get here and you just don't budge, don't budge. In this way, the strength develops.

So keep this in mind. We're trying to work on a state of normalcy. This is how the practice of the precepts shades into the practice of concentration. And then it shades into discernment, because you see the normal way of the mind. It's normally been creating suffering, but you can see a deeper state of normalcy, a state of true well-being that's very, very subtle, which comes when you're not creating suffering anymore. So you've got to see the normal habits of the mind that have been creating suffering before you can undo them, let go of them. Only then can you uncover normalcy in the deeper sense.

So what we are doing is something very normal. What's unusual about it is that we're trying to maintain this state of normalcy as consistently as we can throughout the day. That's really extraordinary. It's the consistency that makes it special.