

## *At Normalcy*

*October 12, 2007*

Most of us spend our lives feeding off our moods, looking for happy moods because those are the fun ones to feed on. But once you've put the mind in a position of feeding off its moods, you find that it's got a lot of other things to feed on as well, such as depression or sorrow. Once you create that kind of mouth and stomach for the mind, hoping to feed off the good moods, it's open to take in the sad moods as well.

This happens in your daily life and in your meditation, too. The reason we keep doing this is because we feel that moods at least create the spice of life. If the mind didn't have moods, we'd feel like we were robots. The idea of a mind without moods sounds like oatmeal nothing added to it, i.e. pretty miserable, pretty dull.

But stop and think about the dangers of our moods. They can induce us to do all kinds of unskillful things. If we get really depressed, we get apathetic. Nothing seems to matter—you lose any sense of concern for the results of your actions. When you get really happy and manic, you get complacent—and again you lose any concern for the results of your actions. You end up doing and saying things that can cause harm very easily. Then you're stuck with the results.

And it keeps going on through a cycle: There's the action, there's the result of the action, and then there's the mood or the defilement that results from the result. Then you act under the power of that mood or that defilement, which creates more unfortunate actions, more unfortunate results.

You have to realize that the mind is not just a consumer. It's a producer as well. If you're going to produce skillful actions, you've got to get the mind in a position where it's not a slave to its moods. From this perspective, the idea of a mind free from its moods sounds like freedom, not dullness: the freedom of a mind that doesn't have to be under the sway of its very undependable moods all the time.

In the Thai tradition, they talk about a mind without moods as a mind at normalcy. This may sound strange to begin with, because for most of us our normal state of mind is to be under the sway of our moods. But here we're speaking about a different kind of normalcy. It's related to the normalcy of the precepts. The word for virtue or precept, *sila*, is often also translated as "normalcy" in Thai. You're at normalcy when you're not killing, not stealing, not engaging in illicit sex, not lying, not taking intoxicants. It's a healthy normalcy.

This is how the practice of the precepts connects to the meditation: You keep

your mind in a balanced state so that it's not a slave to its moods. It doesn't lean over in the direction of happiness or in the direction of sadness. There's a part of the mind that's just simply aware of these things when they come. As a meditator, you want to cultivate that part of the mind, get in touch with it, so that you can step outside of moods. When you're in that position, it's much easier to say things and do things that are not going to be harmful for yourself or for other people. It's a position of freedom. That's the kind of normalcy we're working at. You want freedom to be your normal state of mind.

You practice this through the precepts; you practice this through restraint of the senses. Good and bad things come, and you just learn how to watch them: "This is the normal way of the world." When you see that as normal, then your mind can be normal, too.

Like that chant we have that we're subject to aging, illness, and death. The Thai translation is, "Aging is ordinary. Illness is ordinary. Death is ordinary." When you learn how to see these things as ordinary, the mind can be in an ordinary state of normalcy. This is just the way of the world. This is the way things are. When things get really good, that's the way they are. But are they going to stay good forever? No. Part of you may want to ride the good mood as you would ride a wave when you're surfing, but then the wave runs out and what have you got? You're stuck there in the water. Or even worse, you can get smashed up against the rocks if you've been riding a really strong wave.

When you realize that the mind is not simply a consumer but also a producer, you've got to put it in a position where it produces things well, produces things skillfully: your thoughts, your words, your deeds.

It's like being a potter. You want your mind to be very still and upright, not influenced by its moods, if you're going to throw a good pot. If your mind leans in any direction, your hands are going to lean, too, and the pot will get ruined.

So as you meditate, it's important that you try to develop this sense of the observer that just simply watches and is not overwhelmed or overly oppressed by anything that comes your way, good or bad. Rapture comes, well, you watch it. You realize that rapture has a cause. If you simply ride the wave of the rapture: that's it, you've had the thrill of the wave and then when the wave crashes, where are you? Back where you started. But if you learn how to stay with the breath and see that your focus on the breath is the cause of the rapture, the rapture will come when you need it and go when you don't need it. You're more in control. You've been able to maintain your normalcy—and at the same time, you learn how to observe.

The importance of this is that when bad moods come, you can also have that

observer to depend upon, so that you don't suddenly find yourself stuck in a swamp of a bad mood. There's a part of the mind that's separate, at normalcy at all times, so that no matter how bad the mood, you don't get apathetic, you don't get resentful or whatever the bad mood may be. As a result, you don't do things under the sway of that bad mood. It's a way of finding some freedom. And it acts as the basis for skill in your life.

No matter what comes up in your meditation, say, "Oh, there's this, too. There's this, too." That puts you in a good position when really special things happen. You don't get carried away.

There's a passage in the Canon where the Buddha talks about people experiencing all kinds of wonderful things in the meditation and they start identifying with them. As a result, they don't get anything better than that. They start identifying, "This is me. This is mine," and they get stuck there. The proper attitude, whatever comes up in the meditation, is "Oh, there's this."

If you can learn how to have that attitude toward depression, toward rapture, or toward refined states of concentration, then when the deathless comes, you say, "Oh, there's this, too." And you profit more from the experience. You want to keep your mind at normalcy no matter what happens, because that puts you in the best position to react in the proper way: to react with skill, with heedfulness.

There's a book, *Arctic Dreams*, by Barry Lopez, in which he talks about spending time with natives in Alaska. He says there's a quality that they all had, which he had trouble finding a proper English word for. He said they all had a quality of watchfulness, a sense that there are dangers out there but at the same time not being overwhelmed by the dangers. I think what he was getting at is what in Pali they call *appamada*, and the English translation for that is usually "heedfulness." He said that's their normal state of mind. Now, in civilization we tend to lose that. We tend to get very complacent. But for people living in the wilderness, heedfulness has to be normal.

You're not overly carried away by good moods because you know there's a danger that comes when you get complacent. As for the bad things that come, you learn how to take them in stride. You try to find that center of the mind that says, "Oh, there's this, there's this," and keeps on watching because there will be other things as well. And whatever "this" is, if it's conditioned, it's going to change.

So try to have this quality of watchfulness as your normal state of mind. If you're going to feed on anything, learn how to feed on that—and the sense of freedom that comes with that. It's not unseasoned oatmeal. It's clarity. It's freedom. True freedom lies in that direction. And you find that it really is your refuge, no matter what comes your way.