

Will Meditation Make You Grim & Dull?

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There's an old *New Yorker* cartoon where a man is sitting in meditation in his living room, and his wife and a friend are in the next room, looking in on him. The wife is saying, "Frank used to be such an interesting neurotic before he took up yoga." I know quite a few people who are afraid that when they meditate, they won't be so interesting anymore. They'll start getting dull and grim. But you have to remember, a lot of what makes us interesting is our neuroses. And do you want to continue being neurotic just to be interesting? As for being grim, we *are* serious about happiness. That's true. But we don't have to be grim. We realize that there are dangers in the world, but the right way to live with the danger is to find strength inside, and then to come from that strength, not forgetting that there are dangers.

I was listening recently to a Dhamma teacher someplace talking about how the practice has to be animated by a sense of trust. He went on to say that this doesn't have to be trust in anything in particular, just general trust in the world, or I don't know what, in whatever. That's totally opposed to what the Buddha taught. He said that all skillful qualities in the mind come from heedfulness. Heedfulness is a realization that there are dangers around us—but we can manage them. And our actions make a huge difference. So you have to be careful. But being careful doesn't mean that you have to be grim.

Barry Lopez, when he stayed with the native Alaskans for a long time, noticed that there was a distinctive quality about them. He said that the quality was expressed in words in their language for which you don't really have good equivalents in English. It came down to a sense of watchfulness, apprehension: in other words, heedfulness.

But he also said that they had a good sense of humor. They were able to laugh in the midst of dangers because they realized that having a good sense of humor actually helps eliminate a lot of dangers. If you don't have a sense of humor, you're actually creating more dangers for yourself. Of course, what *kind* of humor you develop is important: You don't want to be snide and sarcastic. A healthy sense of humor starts with learning how to laugh at yourself: seeing your own foibles, seeing your own defilements, but with a sense of humor. Laughing at yourself good-naturedly. That gives you a sense of detachment.

You notice this with the ajans. They knew how to laugh at themselves, which is why when they laughed at their students, it wasn't a mean, nasty laugh. It was just seeing that, oh, the students had the same problems that they had. They learned how to laugh with you. You learned to how to laugh with them. That way, you learned how to laugh at yourself.

When you're able to laugh at yourself and then laugh with other people, your humor has a lot less sting. It becomes a humor that's actually more useful and enjoyable, because it comes from a sense of recognizing your weaknesses as weaknesses. The fact that you can laugh at

them means that you can step back from them—which means that there’s a part of you that can pull out of that weakness.

So one of your best protections against dangers inside and out is learning how to laugh at yourself. That comes with developing the strength inside you need to deal with other dangers. This is one of the reasons why we meditate. We try to put the mind in a good position: mindful, alert, ardent, so that no matter what comes up, we’re ready.

Restraint of the senses is all about this. We tend to just jump into the things we see and hear and pick up through our senses without any sense of wariness at all. But we should be wary, because there are parts of the mind that will get inflamed by some of the things we may see or hear. And the parts of the mind that want to get inflamed are actually looking for something to get lustful about or greedy about or angry about. You’ve got to keep those in check, because if you don’t keep them in check as you go through the day, you have a lot of garbage to clean out as you sit down and meditate.

Now, as the Buddha said, when you try to keep rein on your senses like this, you need to have the body as your post. In other words, you stay with the body as much as you can. Try to make the sense of the breath as refreshing as you can.

You don’t want to have just a sense of equanimity as you go through life. You want to have a sense of positive enjoyment in how it feels to have a body. One of the reasons you work with the breath is so that you feel comfortable inside your body. No matter what the world outside may say about your body, you’re perfectly fine with it inside. That way, you’ve got a friend inside. You’ve got a sense of well-being so that you’re not so hungry to go outside and look for something to snatch and grab and chew on outside.

So as you’re meditating, realize that having a sense of fullness, having a sense of rapture, is a necessary part of the practice. Try to develop it as much as you can while you’re sitting. Then try to carry that through the day as your food. It’s like your lunch bag for the day. When feel comfortable inside yourself, you’re less threatened by other people. And, in a healthy way, you find that you need them less as well.

This is where the fear about being dull comes in. Oftentimes, we’re witty and interesting out of fear that other people won’t like us. But a lot of the effort that goes into being witty and interesting can take a lot away from us. A lot of it comes from neurotic energy. So be okay with the fact that when you’re feeling comfortable inside yourself, you don’t need other people’s approval. You may find that you’re less of a sparkling conversationalist, but you may be a better listener. And you begin to realize there are a lot of people out there who don’t want a sparkling conversationalist. They want a really want good listener.

Here again, though, you run into the fact that because you’ve developed a good sense of humor, your humor will change as you meditate. It’s not that you don’t have a sense of humor anymore. It just goes through a change. It’s less an aspect of idle chatter or the other forms of wrong speech. It actually becomes a type of right speech. After all, genuine humor, genuine

wit, is a sign of intelligence. You see the ironies of life. And because you feel more secure inside, you're not threatened by them. So you can see them more clearly.

One of the things that attracted me to Ajaan Fuang was his sense of humor. It wasn't that he was going around through the day trying to be humorous and interesting. Things would pop up, he'd notice them, and he'd have a good comment to make on them.

So as you meditate, don't be afraid of becoming grim or dull. We're serious and we're quiet, but we still have our sense of humor. We still have our intelligence. It's just that now as you meditate, they're more firmly based so that they're not fueled by a neurotic energy or fear or whatever. They're fueled by a secure sense of well-being. They're fueled by a sense of heedfulness that sees the dangers in life, and that the main dangers are inside, but that when you take care of the dangers inside, then there's really nothing to fear from outside. That kind of seriousness then leads to a huge sense of relief.

So it's not weighty. It's very light. It means you have a different kind of energy in yourself. You bring a different kind of energy to the world. And it's all for the good.