

ORDINARY MIND

Alan Zundel at the HeartAwake Center, March 27th 2007

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When I first started to become serious about a spiritual life as a young man, somehow I got the idea that the aim of the spiritual life was to come to a different state of consciousness—I know how I got the idea, I mean it was all over the place in the early 1970s [*laughs*]*—*and carried that idea with me for decades. I still believe that, but the idea I had of what that meant is very different than the idea I have now.

Then, to me, the state of consciousness I was looking for I would have thought of as an extraordinary state. Some form of ‘higher’ consciousness, as they called it. And, like a number of other people of my generation, some of my expectations or my imagining what this would be like was colored by experiences I had with drugs; that states of mind similar to that would be what I was looking for. Or you read descriptions of saints or holy people down through the ages and you think this ecstatic state or bliss state or something like this is what you’re looking for. That’s what I thought I was looking for, for about three decades.

Then about four and a half years ago, I came into another state of consciousness; one that’s persisted from then until now. It was what I was looking for, but it was not what I imagined it would be. Because what I was looking for was an extraordinary state of consciousness, and what I found was an ordinary state of consciousness. Not ordinary in the sense of ‘like everybody else’, which ordinary sometimes means, but ordinary in the sense of ‘plain’ and ‘unadorned.’ There’s a phrase in Zen that describes the enlightened mind as ‘ordinary mind.’ One of the sayings that describes this is, ‘what do you do when you’re enlightened? Well, you chop wood and carry water’—you live life as you did before.

So what is it about this state of mind that makes it something to seek? What makes it something to seek is that prior to this state of mind you’re somehow dissatisfied with the state of mind you’re in. At least I was; this is why *I* was seeking it. It’s not that I was especially miserable, not that I had serious emotional trauma in my life or something like this that I was carrying around. It was more like an itch in myself. And I think that’s what they mean in Buddhism when they talk about *dukka*, often translated as ‘suffering’ and we think serious suffering, deep suffering, but to my mind—at least for some people—it’s more like an itch.

It’s more like an itch. It’s irritating; you feel this vague discomfort that needs to be addressed. Now, there are times when you have a rash and it itches, you may even forget about it if you get busy doing something or you get distracted, and you’re not even conscious of that rash being there. But then eventually the feeling comes back and you want to scratch it or get rid of it somehow. Well, this vague sense of itchiness, of dissatisfaction, of not being completed somehow, not being where I wanted to be as a human being—somehow associating this with how my mind was, led me to seek a different state of mind.

The main reason I know that this state of mind I have now is what I was looking for, is because that itch is gone; I've ceased to seek a different state of mind. It may mean nothing to anybody else, but it means a lot to me. In fact, I'd say if you could pick out events in your life as being more important than other events—which is kind of arbitrary because everything seems equally important from another perspective—but if you could pick out an event in my life, I'd say this was the most important event in my life, when I passed from this one state of mind to this other state of mind. I *ceased to seek*, that was the big change. It just no longer was there, this desire to seek for a different state of mind. I was content with the state of mind I had, even though this state of mind I've had since then has not been very different from the state of mind I had before then, other than not having that itch [*laughs*], not having that desire for something else.

In other words, rather than saying I found what I was seeking, it seems more accurate to say I lost something that was causing me to seek. I *lost* something—what that itch was really caused by was identification with my sense of self. I know I hammer this theme over and over, but that's because where I'm talking from, what I'm trying to describe and convey to you, all comes out of this change in my state of mind. [*pause*] I forget what I was saying. [*laughs—voices from the group*] Lost—lost my identification—lost my place. [*laughs*] Talking about my self—as usual. So, the sense of self.

Now, you often hear that the aim of the spiritual life is to lose your self, or something like that. What actually happened to me, though, and just speaking out of my experience and setting aside any speculation about any other states of mind other than the one I have, was more that the self remains, but the identification with the self ceases. It's not locked up in the sense of who you are; the sense of who you are that you've carried around your whole life suddenly becomes transparent.

One of the images that came to mind when I was meditating on this just now was of a poster that I saw a few times. It was made up of dozens of faces of people, human beings of all kinds—different skin colors, different sexes, different ages. There were all these faces covering the poster, but when you looked at them as a whole you could see the face of Jesus. Have you ever seen that poster? So all these little faces make up the one big face of Jesus, and there's this perceptual thing where you look at it one way and you see Jesus' face there, or you look at it the other way and you see these dozens of disparate faces. The difference in the sense of self is between seeing that self as this one big face, or seeing it as composed of a lot of little things that make it up.

Now which is it really? Is it 'me' who I think I am, or is it all these various components of me made up of pieces of memories, thoughts, emotional states, habits, all these different pieces that go to make up the self. All of a sudden the perception shifts from seeing 'me' as a self, to seeing 'me' as a fiction composed of all these pieces, and the identification with that larger self ceases. Now you can still perceptually 'see' your self, but you don't quite believe in it because you know you can perceptually also step back and see that it's made of all these disparate things. So there's no longer the identification with the self if you no longer believe in it. The sense of itchiness really comes from being caught in that one face, and not being able to see the other faces—being locked into the perception of the one face, and not being able to be aware that that's only one

way of seeing.

That was the end of my seeking but it's not the end of my journey. It's never the end of anyone's journey—there is no end of the journey, I don't think. I stopped seeking, but that doesn't mean I stopped changing. The last four years or so there's been a lot of changes in my psyche and I'd say some of that is—it feels like a rearranging of the furniture. Pieces of my self are falling into a different pattern around this general sense of freedom from being locked into a self. And I have the feeling that there's going to be continual changes throughout life; people that I find credible say that there are further changes that you go through beyond this point. But I still talk about this as finding what I was seeking because I'm no longer seeking anything. Even if there are other states of consciousness or ways of being other than this, I don't have a desire for them. You know, if they come they come, and if they don't they don't.

The main reason I'm bringing all this up, is to try to dissuade you from the idea that the aim of the spiritual life is to come into an extraordinary state of consciousness. For myself, early on when I first started meditating, I had at least a couple of experiences that I would say were extraordinary. They were ecstatic states, really; they were very intense. A loss of the sense of self and a feeling of expansion and all these classic things. But they were temporary states, they came and they went. And I thought, 'that's what I'm seeking'. It felt so good, and they seemed so extraordinary that I kept looking for that, and looking for that, and looking for that, but now, having lost this itch, I look back on that and I say, 'I have no desire for that'. And it seems to me like a form of escapism to desire that, to desire a state of mind that's other than recognizably human, that's recognizably just somebody functioning in the world as it is, as a human being. Experiencing the ordinary human emotions, doing the ordinary human tasks, and all of that. That seems to me sufficient.

I look at people that are still seeking, and how easy it is to get that sense of seeking something attached to picture of an extraordinary state, a state of great bliss or ecstasy or something like this, and to keep looking for that, when that's not really what satisfies that sense of seeking, from my experience. It's only my experience, it could be different for someone else, but I tend to doubt that we're all that different from each other. So the main thing I'm seeking to convey is recognizing that an ordinary state of mind is really what the aim is. I'm sure you all have moments when you just forget yourself and are living life as an ordinary human being and feel fairly content with who you are and what you're doing. Having more of that is really what you're seeking; having that continuously, and without it being interrupted by this itchiness coming back.

Ordinary mind, not extraordinary mind. Extraordinary mind is escape from being human, ordinary mind is being human without adornment. Without the need for something more, for something different, for something better.

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