

Monsters & Angels

By [Nelly Kaufer](#), Lead Teacher Pine Street Sangha

Monsters and angels inhabit the same closet. When you slam the door on the painful and scary aspects of your inner world, that same door excludes your aliveness and creativity. But ripping open the closet door is not the best plan. It's possible to crack open the door without experiencing a life-threatening onslaught of the emotions that you have zealously avoided. You can learn and practice this skill in meditation. Here's an example of how meditation can integrate a painful memory, but not too much or for too long.

Seemingly out of the blue I'm visualizing fifth grade when my Mom forgot to pick me up from school. I knew Mrs. McFarlan wanted to go home, I could tell by her awkward pacing, but she couldn't leave me alone in the classroom or make me go outside and wait by myself on that stormy afternoon. Besides, she was too fretful to leave. In the meditation it was like I was right there, in fifth grade, smelling moldy textbooks and the fear in my sweat. Suddenly the whole scene flipped, and I was in a seemingly endless field of lavender-scented, glowing flowers.

This sort of helpful shift of attention often happens when you allow your meditation to naturally unfold. Different states of consciousness flow and flip, one onto the next. Mostly I trust that when something painful or terrifying erupts out of the closet you will only try on as much as you can tolerate.

When describing this meditative experience, the meditator regarded the field of flowers as a "distraction." I bristle at that word "distraction," though try and hide this reaction. The visual of the bed of flowers served an important function. It "changed the channel," supported and comforted the meditator after the painful childhood memory.

There's a recently termed phrase for this, the "window of tolerance." Regardless of whether you use the metaphor of window or closet, maybe you can learn to rely more upon what you previously degraded as "distractions." Caring for yourself enough that you don't shove yourself into what is intolerable. Being patient enough to slowly and authentically become more tolerant of what is hard to bear.

The first truth in Buddhism is that we each have experiences that are hard to bear. The task becomes to know this directly in our experience and discover how to bear a bit more, though in a way that is healing rather than more traumatizing. Counter-instinctually, running from mental and emotional pain often makes it worse and becoming more aware of it is relieving.

Consciousness altering from its usual everyday state is a feature of meditation. The meditation above contains two different kinds of altered consciousness, balancing one another. One part investigates and can relieve personal trauma. The other, a calmer state of mind, can relieve anxiety and allow for new perspectives. Depending upon your bent, you might value one and

devalue the other. Psychologically minded meditators might believe they should have stayed with the painful childhood memories to get to the root and extract it, like a rotting tooth. Those who crave calm might yearn for the field of glowing flowers. But what if the aching memory of fifth grade is just as valuable as the field of flowers, but differently valuable? The combination of these two very different states of mind function as a healthy equipoise.

I'm not sure when I first became interested in altered states of consciousness. Andrew Wile said that kids obtain altered states by spinning on the merry go round or in their footsteps. I abandoned myself to psychedelic trips in search for spiritual bliss. I threw care and caution to the winds and paid the price. Maybe I was searching for a bed of golden flowers to relieve me from the angst of growing up. That's not what I found.

We love calm, peaceful states. Probably love them even more in this technological world that is dragging us to and fro, from exhilaration to despair. What a relief, if only for a moment, there is just the breath or the field of glowing flowers. And what a relief to imagine that we could live only in this supportive comfort. But inevitably states of consciousness shift and change.

Calm, settled states are good for us, just like a kelp smoothie infused with hemp seed and brimming with the antioxidants. Though if we drank this smoothie morning, noon and night our bodies would yearn for other nutrients and after a while our metabolism would go wacko. We would slip into the Burger Barn for a cheeseburger rare and don't forget the fries and the milkshake. Later that evening, our stomach screaming, I'm not sure what the cries would be. Would it be from too much greasy meat and fries or from too much extremism? After all Buddhism is the middle path.

Life is a journey between fluctuating and alternating states of consciousness and navigating this is the skill and art of living. The closet of our inner world contains far more than the angels and the monsters we know. It can open up to something broader and more interesting than what we can imagine.