

Staying Normal

August 1, 2006

The chant we had just now, “I am subject to aging, illness, death, and separation”: The Thai translation is a little bit different from the English. In the Thai it says, “Aging is normal, illness is normal, death is normal.” But for us, these things are not normal. We can’t keep our minds at normalcy when they happen. They knock the mind off center, because we keep forgetting to remind ourselves that these things can happen all the time. It’s all around us. More than 200,000 people die on average every day. That’s a lot of death. And I don’t imagine that many of those people who died today knew this morning at sunrise that they were going to die today.

In that sense, death can take us by surprise. But another sense, we should know it could happen at any time. We should be prepared. If death doesn’t hit us first, then aging and illness will come as well. These things are normal. They’re part of being a human being. When we decided we wanted to become human beings, we weren’t thinking about this. We were thinking about how much we would enjoy human life. But this is part of the contract. So when it’s a normal part of life, we have to learn to keep our minds at normalcy when these things happen. And to do that, we need to be prepared.

This is why we meditate. When the Buddha teaches about aging, illness, and death, he gives specific advice as what to do to prepare yourself, but he also teaches in a general sense that we have to be heedful, we have to be careful at all times. That’s part of the meditation. Reflect on these things. One of the reflections for the monks says, “Days and nights fly past, fly past, what am I doing right now?” If the Buddha were to ask you this question right now, how would you answer?

If you were able to answer, “I’m developing mindfulness, concentration, and discernment,” or what they call the four noble dhammas—virtue, concentration, discernment, and release—that would be a good answer. Anything aside from that would be heedlessness. If you wander away from these things, you’ve wandered off into that territory where aging, illness, and death can catch you off guard, catch you off balance. But if you’re developing, virtue, concentration, discernment, and release, those are the qualities that keep the mind at normalcy.

One of the translations for *sila* is just that: normalcy. This is the normal way of the mind, although the Buddha’s normal is not necessarily our ordinary state of mind. But remember: For him, defilement is something abnormal. Grief,

lamentation, pain, distress, and despair are abnormal. They're not intrinsic in the mind.

That's good news. If they were intrinsic, we'd be in a lot of trouble. There'd be no escape. But there *is* an escape. And it starts with this, with virtue, bringing the mind to a place where it can easily refrain from killing, stealing, illicit sex, intoxicants, and all the unskillful forms of wrong speech. Once that becomes your habitual way, you're developing a lot of the good qualities that help keep the mind at normalcy. You learn to resist the impulse, say, to do something harmful. The impulse may be there, but you don't act on it. That's the beginning of normalcy.

In one of Ajaan Lee's talks, he talks about how this is the beginning of what they call the heightened mind, which is concentration. You can lift your mind above its impulses. You don't have to act on them. Even though something happens where you really would like to say something nasty to somebody else because they've behaved in a nasty way, you can say, 'No, that's beneath me. It's counterproductive.' The part of the mind that can pull back from an impulse: That's where you'll find normalcy.

Even more so when you practice concentration, learning to keep the mind steady no matter what happens. Sounds come and go. Thoughts of the past, thoughts of the future, come and go. All these things come and go, but the mind stay steady in the midst of them.

This requires practice, because the nature of the mind, the ordinary mind, is to get knocked around by these things. That's because you go out and put yourself in the line of fire by laying claim to things that get knocked around, so you get knocked around, too. You've got to learn how to let go. As you're sitting here meditating, forget who you are, what your name is, what your nationality is, what you gender is. All those things: Put all them aside. All your personal history, put that aside. Just be here in the present moment. Just be with the breath. And you find there *is* a part of the mind that can stay with the breath. The other parts that would get knocked around: You can let go of them for the time being.

Try to develop this quality of normalcy, so that the mind is not affected by things. That's actual normalcy for the mind. It may not be your ordinary state, but you try to learn how to make it more and more normal, more and more ordinary with practice. This helps when the ordinary and normal things of the world come, you can see them as normal, and your mind can maintain its normalcy.

Even more so when you start developing discernment, looking into this issue of why the mind lays claim to things. *My* body, *my* family, *my* car, *my* wife, *my* husband, *my* brother, *my* uncle: Why does it do this? Partly because we need a sense of I and mine to function in this world, but then we take that "my" to be an

ultimate truth when it's not. It's just a convention. It's just an assumption that helps us in certain circumstances, but it becomes something we hold on to deep down inside.

That's where we've got to learn how to pry it loose. We realize that although there may be some cases where the *I* and *mine* are useful, there are others when they really cause trouble. These are things we make, so these are things we can stop making. There's nothing intrinsic in your body that says it's yours. Go down and asked the oxygen atoms: "Who do you belong to?" They don't know anything about it. Ask all the various tissues in the body, "Whose tissues are these?" They'd be at lost for words. They have no sense of belonging to you. You're the one who has laid claim to them.

There are cases where it's useful to know that this is your body, as supposed to somebody else's body. That can prevent a lot of problems, but remember, it's a convention. When the convention starts causing trouble, you have to learn how to let it go. When you let it go, you get released. This is one of the basic metaphors in the Buddha's teaching: the image of a burning fire. People in those days believed that fire burns because it clings on to its fuel. When it lets go, it's released. In other words, the fuel doesn't hold onto the fire. The fire is the one that's doing the holding on, and it's trapping itself by holding on. To be released, it has to let go.

The same with the mind: Your suppositions are not holding on to you. You're the one holding on to them. Like the supposition of *I* and *mine*: Once Ven. Sariputta was telling his fellow monks that he'd surveyed his mind and realized there was nothing whose change would have an effect on his mind at all. Immediately Ven. Ananda asked him, "What if anything happened to the Buddha? Wouldn't that upset you?" Sariputta replied that he'd think it was a sad thing that such a great being had passed, as he had done so much good for the world. But, he said, the mind wouldn't be affected.

And Ananda's response was revealing. He said, "Ah, it's a sign that Sariputta has no more conceit"—here meaning the sense that "I am." That's why we grieve. Once there is *I*, then it has its *mine*, and then from the *I* and the *mine*, you latch on to things that can change. The reason you grieve is because your *I* and your *mine* are affected. But if you don't start with that initial conceit, that when things change, the change doesn't have to affect you.

It doesn't mean you're hardhearted. After all, in Sariputta's case, he realized that the Buddha was doing a lot of good for the world. It was a good thing to have him there. But the sense of Sariputta himself feeling deprived or hurt by the Buddha's passing: That had gone.

As it turned out, the Buddha was not the first to pass away. Sariputta passed away before the Buddha. In the Chinese account, the Buddha gets really upset, but you wonder why they have that version. In the original version, Ananda is the one who's upset. He comes to see the Buddha and says, "Horrible news! Sariputta has passed away. It's as if I lost my bearings." The Buddha asked him, "But did Sariputta take virtue with him? Did he take concentration with him? Did he take discernment or release with him?" No. "So he hasn't deprived you of anything important, anything that's really valuable in your life. Why get upset?"

After all, this is the normal way of the world. We have to learn to keep our minds at normalcy in the midst of all that, learn how to let go of the things we've grabbed onto entirely of our own accord. These things haven't grabbed on to us. We've grabbed on to them. When they bite back, we complain about them, yet we were the ones who grabbed on to them to begin with. So if we learn how to let go, then no matter what happens, there is part of the mind deep down inside that's not affected. And because of that, you can still function well, doing the proper thing in the face of aging, illness, and death. That's how you maintain normalcy. This is the normalcy of release.

So all these qualities—virtue, concentration, discernment, and release—revolve around this normalcy of mind. They work together. Ajaan Lee has a passage in one of his books where he analyzes virtue, and in the course of his analysis, virtue starts turning into concentration and discernment. He analyzes concentration, and it starts turning into virtue and discernment. He analyzes discernment, and it turns into a virtue and concentration. In other words, these qualities infiltrate one another. They all help one another to establish this quality of normalcy.

Then they yield a totally separate kind of normalcy that doesn't have to be established. It's an unestablished normalcy, they call it unestablished consciousness. That's the ultimate true normalcy of mind: ultimate release, ultimate freedom, free from grief, lamentation, despair, free from conceit, aging, illness, any effect of aging, illness, death, or separation. That's the potential of the mind. That's the mind at normalcy.

So if we see our minds are out of kilter, we should do what we can to bring them back in line, not only for our own good but also for the good of people around us. That famous story about the acrobat with his assistant: As the assistant said, "I have to look after my own sense of balance. You look after your sense of balance. And that way, we help one another." If you maintain your balance, your steadiness in the midst of all the unsteadiness of the world, you're helping the people around you in addition to helping yourself.

That's the good thing about the Buddha's teaching. He found a way that you can help yourself and help others at the same time. He didn't see that there was an inevitable struggle between your own good, your own well-being, and well-being of others. He saw that if you're wise, you can put the two of those together. You can bring them into harmony. And the harmony starts right here, by developing this quality of normalcy in your thoughts, your words, and your deeds, through virtue, concentration, discernment, and release. When the normal events of the world hit a mind that's at normalcy like this, there's no conflict.

So try to develop your mind in that direction.