

Normalcy

July 31, 2020

When the mind is really released, its release is said to be unprovoked. In other words, it's not dependent on conditions.

There was a theory in the time of the Buddha about how physical events happened. There were different elements or properties, *dhātu*, and they either existed in a calm state or a provoked one. When they were provoked, they would act up. If the fire element was provoked, there'd be huge conflagrations. If the water element was provoked, there'd be floods. If the wind element was provoked, there'd be storms. But when the provocation ended, then the element would go back to its normal state.

So when they said that the arahant's release was unprovoked, it meant that it wasn't dependent on provocation, which means that it would never change.

They also used the same theory to talk about states of mind. When the property of sensuality is provoked, lust comes up. When the property of irritation is provoked, anger. Of course, when those things are provoked, they create a lot of trouble for the mind. You end up doing and saying and thinking things that are actually harmful for you and for the people around you.

So even though you're not yet at the state of an unprovoked release, you can still try to keep the mind unprovoked, to give it practice in staying at normalcy.

This is what we're doing as we work on our virtue and on our concentration. The Pali word for virtue, *sīla*, is sometimes translated in Thai as *normalcy*: the mind in its normal state. It's not killing, it's not stealing, it's not having illicit sex, it's not lying, it's not taking intoxicants. It's when it breaks the precepts that it's abnormal. It's been provoked and it can't withstand the provocation. So when we're taking the precepts and holding the precepts, we're learning how to withstand provocation. People can say things and do things that would lure us into anger or lure us into sensuality, lure us into lust, but we say No and try to keep the mind on an even keel.

This is where the concentration helps. For the Buddha, the mind at peace is in a state of normalcy. Now, for most people in the world, that's not the normal state. They're reacting to every provocation possible. This is why we see so much turmoil all over the world: People haven't built up their resistance. So as we work on concentration, no matter what comes into the mind, we're not going to be provoked by it. Sensual desire, ill will, torpor & lethargy, restlessness & anxiety, uncertainty: We're not going to go there. That's our determination. Then we learn the techniques and skills for holding to that determination. In this way, we keep the mind at normalcy.

This, of course, requires more than just virtue and concentration. It also requires discernment: understanding, when there's a provocation, how it comes, what its origination is

—in other words, what in the mind causes it—how it passes away, what its allure is, what its drawbacks are, and how you can escape from it. Now, you may not fully know the escape, but when you learn to escape from specific instances, that's giving you practice. It's in this way that virtue, concentration, and discernment all work together to keep the mind at normalcy.

Something comes up that would provoke you to break the precepts, and you learn to look at it and say, "What's the allure of that thing?" You learn to think about the drawbacks of going with the provocation. When you can develop a sense of shame or a sense of compunction around that—that you'd be really embarrassed to break a precept over that kind of thing, or you just have a sense of distaste, you feel conscience-stricken at breaking a precept over that kind of thing—your discernment has helped to protect your virtue.

The same when you're practicing concentration: Things can come up in the mind, and you have your original determination not to go with them. But often the determination on its own is not enough. You have to remind yourself of the drawbacks of going for things that distract you. They drive up in a car, looking attractive, and they say, "Come on! Come with me." And you have to realize: If you go with them, they're going take you to some dark corner of the city and then shoot you and throw you out of the car. When you can see your distractions in those terms, then it's a lot easier to say No to them. In other words, you're thinking about the consequences.

This is one of our big problems in society right now: People are acting on their moods without thinking about the consequences. That, for them, is freedom, but the Buddha saw it as bondage. You're binding yourself. You're making yourself a slave to your cravings. So here again, it's your discernment that's helping you protect your concentration.

This is why the forest ajaans would say again and again and again, the practice is not a case of working on your virtue and then waiting till your virtue is perfect before working on your concentration, and then waiting till your concentration is perfect before you start working on discernment. You have to work on all three together: Virtue fosters concentration, concentration fosters discernment, but then discernment comes and protects your virtue, protects your concentration. Your concentration protects your virtue. They're all working together to keep the mind at this state of normalcy, so that when difficult things in life come up—in other words, when the ordinary things of life come up—you can see them as ordinary, and the mind can stay at normalcy in their face. Aging comes, illness comes, death comes. We see this all around us, and we have to remind ourselves: This is normal.

Our problem is that we see it as normal for other people but not normal for ourselves. We constantly think that we're an exception. It's like that cartoon in the New Yorker: Three death-figures. One of them is lying on the ground on its back, and one of the other ones is saying, "You never think it's going to happen to you." But once there's birth there's going to be aging, there's going to be illness, there's going to be death. These things are normal for everybody. If

we want to learn how not to suffer from them, we have to keep our minds normal in their presence.

This is what virtue and concentration and discernment are for. They work together to keep the mind at normalcy. It's bad enough that aging, illness, and death can come, but we often make them worse. We've got to practice so at the very least we don't make things worse than they have to be. We work on developing the qualities of the mind that can take us beyond them.

But as long as we're not beyond them, we still have to practice this quality of normalcy as we face them down. Because the closer the mind is in being able to maintain its normalcy, the closer it is to finding something really special inside—something, the Buddha said, that really is unprovoked and cannot be provoked. That's when the mind is really free. But in the meantime, you can learn how to train the mind to be hard to provoke.

In that way, when the normal things of life come, the mind doesn't become its own enemy. It can stay its own friend: clear, collected, not doing anything to harm itself or harm anybody else. That's a mind that's well-trained, and as the Buddha said, when the mind is trained you find happiness. Even though it may not yet be totally free from its slavery to craving, still it's heading in the right direction.