

How to Be Self-centered

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Back in the 1980s, a logo appeared in Thailand, *yaa ben gae tua*, which can be translated as “Don’t be self-centered.” It was in the shape of a Buddha. “Don’t” was the head; “be” was the neck; “self” the torso and arms; and “centered” the legs. Ajaan Suwat took exception to that. He said, “This is not a Buddhist message. The Buddha wants us to be self-centered.”

Of course, what he meant by that was not self-centered in a selfish or unfeeling way. It was more to be centered on the fact that the problem lies within us, and we’re the ones who have to solve it. After all, that’s the Buddha’s analysis in the four noble truths. We suffer not because of what other people do, and the path to the end of suffering doesn’t lie in straightening other people out. We suffer from what we’re doing, and the path lies in straightening out ourselves. So that’s where our focus has to be; that’s where we have to be centered.

What this means is not that we have to forget about being self-centered. We have to be self-centered in a wise way, a skillful way. And that deals with two big problems. One is when you’re irritated by other people’s behavior. You should center your attention not so much on their behavior—what’s irritating about it. Center on your own irritation. Why do you let yourself get worked up about it? What’s the problem? Why are you feeling offended by that other person? That’s what you’ve got to look into.

Now, this doesn’t mean you don’t care about other people. It’s simply that you’ve got to develop the *brahmavihāras*, all four of them, both toward other people and toward yourself. You have goodwill for them. You have compassion and empathetic joy, but you realize there are times when their behavior is their behavior, and you can’t do much about it. Or even if you could do something about it, you’d lose your focus. It might be misdirected, especially if you still have that problem within yourself.

Remember the Buddha’s instructions to monks who are going to make an accusation to another monk. First off, you have to make sure you don’t have the same problem in your own behavior. You have to make sure you’re doing it not to inflict an offense on the other monk but actually to get the monk out of the offense. And you have to do it with an attitude of goodwill. I’ve seen some cases where it’s taken years for an accuser to get around to developing the right attitude before making an accusation. But it was worth it. The accuser learned a lot of lessons about himself, and when the issue came up, it was a lot easier to resolve.

So your focus has to be not on what people are doing wrong but on what *you're* doing wrong. If you're going to look at their behavior, look at it as a mirror. What does it tell you about you in your behavior? That's bringing everything back inside—self-centered in a wise way.

That relates to the second problem: the voice of your inner critic that focuses on judging your behavior. This has to be trained. For all too many of us, our inner critic is not very helpful. We've been criticized in harsh, unfeeling, dismissive ways in the past, and we've tended to pick up those voices and internalize them. As I've said before, the Buddha said that our practice is one of looking for the Dhamma through committing ourselves to the practice and reflecting on what we're doing as we practice. The voice of that reflection has to be trained just as the committed side has to be trained.

One of the first lessons you've got to learn is how to approach this as an experiment, or approach it as you would approach playing a sport. There has to be a certain lighthearted attitude to what you're doing. It *is* serious, but you can't make it grim, because if the criticism comes and it's too heavy, you're not going to pick it up and carry it with you. You're just going to leave it there or let it oppress you. But if the criticism is light, you can pick it up, carry it around and use it to remind yourself the next time. "Okay, the last time I was in this situation, I made that mistake. I don't want to make it again."

Think of someone mastering a sport—someone trying to make shots in basketball. You stand there and you miss. You try it again, miss again, and try again. You keep at it until you finally get it, and then you get it again. And you get it again. What's the attitude that that person has? How does that person talk to him- or herself? That's the way you've got to talk to yourself as a meditator, as a practitioner in general.

The other critical voice is dismissive. That puts an end to the practice session. You have to have an encouraging voice as well. Here, too, you bring in the *brahmavihāras*. The critical voice has to have compassion, but you also have to have empathetic joy for the times when you do it right, because you need encouragement. Remember that the Buddha talked about knowing the time to say pleasing things and knowing the time to say displeasing things. Well, that's how your critic has to be trained.

What you may learn through this is that you've got lots of critics in there. Here, too, you can think of the committee of the mind. You've got to ferret out which voice is the one that's really worth listening to. Just because one voice is loud and repetitive doesn't mean that you have to take it seriously. Try listening to the voices that are compassionate, that do want you to do it well, and are happy

when you do it well. The equanimity there is for realizing that this is going to take time. So you're willing to put in time and not get discouraged by the first couple of times you stumble, or when things are going well and all of a sudden there's a dry patch and they're not going well.

As Ajaan Fuang would say, learn how to play at the meditation the same way that a sportsman would play at a sport. Have a lighthearted attitude toward it. Not that you don't realize that it's serious; it is. But we're working on something cheerful, the attempt to put an end to suffering. And although it requires determination, persistence and endurance, it should also be done with joy. Here again, Ajaan Suwat: "Have a sense of how fortunate you are to do this practice. Take joy in the fact that you can."

When you can develop that attitude, then you're self-centered in the right way. As long as you need a self—and you will all the way up through non-returning—train it to be a friendly self, a self on your side, a self that gets you properly centered. That is, you're centered in right concentration where you're coming from a position of strength and well-being, with a happiness that doesn't take anything away from anyone else at all.

When the time comes to let go of that self, you're not letting go out of hatred or neurotic fear. You let go simply because you realize you don't need it anymore. Think of the image of the raft. You get to the other side of the river and have appreciation for the raft. "This raft has been very helpful. I'll leave it here for somebody else." Then you can go on your way.

So as long as you need that sense of self on the path, learn how to be self-centered wisely. When the time comes to let go, just as you held this self lightly, you can let it go with a sense of lightness as well.