

## *Criticism*

*September 7, 2020*

The basic premise of the four noble truths is that we're suffering because we're doing something wrong. But we can learn, we can do it right. We learn from people who've learned how to do it right themselves—which is one of the reasons why criticism is such an important part of the training, because sometimes you can't see your own faults.

This is why the Buddha taught Rahula to look at his actions as he would look at a mirror: He'd see his intentions reflected there, he'd see his skillfulness reflected there. But Rahula wasn't left to his own devices. If he saw that he'd made a mistake, or he suspected he might have made a mistake, he was to go and talk it over with someone more advanced on the path. And that person could help point out where he'd gone wrong.

This is why we have the Sangha. Otherwise, people would just go out and practice on their own, thinking that they could depend on themselves. But you need the eyes of somebody else because there's a lot of yourself that you can't even see. How many parts of your body can you actually see? To see many of the parts, you'd need to have a mirror, or two mirrors. But to look at them directly requires somebody else.

You see this principle in the teaching of the Kalamas. The Buddha starts out by saying, when you know for yourselves that something is unskillful, then you should avoid it; if something is skillful, you should develop it. But he doesn't stop simply with your own observations on "skillful." He also states that if something is praised by the wise, it's something to follow. If something is criticized by the wise, it's something to avoid.

So again, you're depending on the insights of others, people who have more experience than you do. And you should treasure their criticisms, without feeling like you've been unfairly singled out. As the Buddha said, *Regard someone who points out your faults as someone who's pointing out treasure*, because it provides you with the opportunity to see something in your own behavior that you may have missed. Only when it's pointed out to you can you then do something about it.

Years back, about a month after Ajaan Fuang passed away, I went to pay my respects to Ajaan Maha Boowa. I went along with another more senior monk from Wat Asokaram. His students drove us there. And in the course of being with Ajaan Maha Boowa for half an hour, I got criticized three times. When we left, the other monk said to me, "You know, I've visited Ajaan Maha Boowa I don't know how many times, and he's never criticized me once. I'm jealous." That's the right attitude to have—we're here to learn. And the Buddha's idea of a safe environment is one in which you can learn about your faults, and have space to work on them.

Sometimes we hear people saying they'd like a safe environment where everything is non-judgmental and nobody makes any criticisms, nobody says anything challenging. But that's an

*unsafe* environment. It leaves you where you are, and where you are is suffering. A safe environment is where someone you trust points out your faults and gives you an opportunity to look at yourself in a new light, to learn. The safety there is that you're not simply left to your own devices, because the people who don't pass judgment on you basically don't care. "You can do what you want, it's fine with me." they say. But do they care where your actions are going to lead you? No.

Part of the issue is *your* learning how to care about the results of your actions. This is a very basic principle in the Dhamma. It's a quality of heart that the Buddha calls *ottappa*, translated as "compunction." It's when you think of doing something and you know that it's going to be unskillful and you realize, "I don't want to have to deal with the results of something unskillful."

It's basically a belief in the principle of kamma, combined with right resolve—that you want to avoid creating more unskillful things than is necessary. In some of the suttas, it's paired with *atappa*: ardency. You don't just try to avoid unskillful things but you also try to develop skillful things in their place, and you're really serious about it. It's this quality of being serious about wanting to improve yourself that's proven when you're willing to take criticism. If you don't take criticism well, how serious are you about really wanting to practice the Dhamma?

We're fortunate we have this place here where people have provided the necessities for practicing. Sometimes it gets too easy to take it for granted. It's a real privilege to be here, and we should make ourselves worthy of that privilege: Appreciate all the effort that's gone into creating this place, maintaining this place.

So we work on our own behavior, that's all they ask. Work on our own behavior and also treat one another well, treat one another with kindness, treat one another with concern. And treat your own actions with kindness and concern. "Kindness," here, doesn't mean just playing along with your defilements. It means acting, speaking, and thinking in ways that will not cause harm. You're not apathetic, you're not callous, you're concerned about the results of your actions—because what else do you have as your refuge?

That chant we often repeat: "The world is without shelter, there's no one in charge." If our actions aren't our shelter, what shelter do we have? And as with any shelter, if it's falling apart or missing big pieces, you should welcome the opportunity to find some pieces to replace the missing parts.

What this comes down to is that criticism should be taken well. The monks have a rule that if someone criticizes them, they have to show respect. Even if the criticism is wrong, they still show respect to the person. They might not necessarily follow the advice of the person criticizing them, but still they show respect in case some day that person might have something that really is useful to say. Because even crazy people can have some lucid insights every now and then. So just because someone has offered bad criticism in the past doesn't

mean you should show disrespect, because that just shuts off that possible conduit to something that might actually be good.

So simply tell yourself: Whatever that person's motives, whether they're well-meaning or ill-meaning, at least the person is concerned enough to say something. Then you can go back and you consider what they said. And when you can consider it in all fairness and not get upset about the fact that you were criticized, you're more likely to take advantage of the fact that we're here practicing together.

It sometimes requires other people's eyes to see you in ways that you can't see yourself.