The Words of Other People

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There’s a story in the commentary about the Buddha in a certain town. Sectarians from other schools hire some people to curse them. They go out for alms and they get cursed. Any time they show their face in the town, they get cursed. Ananda comes to the Buddha and says, “Wouldn’t it be better if we go someplace else?” The Buddha says, “Well, suppose the next place we go, they hire people to curse us. What should we do?” “Well, go someplace else,” Ananda says. The Buddha says, “Well, there’d be no place on earth where we could live, even if you go off by yourself.” You’re still with a human being, i.e., yourself, and the voices in your head turn into your demons in your head. So you’ve got to learn the right attitude toward other people’s words. This is part of the worldly dhamma, as the Buddha talks about. There’s praise and there’s criticism. This is a part of being in the world. You find it both outside and, of course, in the voices you’ve internalized in your head. In fact, it’s because of the voices in your head that the outside voices are hard to take. The voices inside the head that criticize you unfairly or seem to be reasonable and objective but can speak in very destructive ways. Those are the actual problem. You’ve got to learn how to look at those. When you can deal with those, then it’s a lot easier to deal with the voices outside. And you find, of course, that you’ve got to deal with both at the same time. You have to remember that other people’s mouths are their mouths for them to use any way they want. And many times when they’re speaking to you, they’re not really speaking to you. They’re just letting off steam or saying to you something that they’d actually like to say to somebody else. But you’re the most convenient person around. In other words, it’s their karma. And you have to learn how to let it go past. This doesn’t mean that all criticism is meaningless and that you should ignore it. But don’t suck it into your direction. And watch it as it goes past and see if there’s anything there that you can learn from. If the criticism is just, pointing out something that really is a fault, we have something to work with. If it’s not, you’ve learned something about that other person, which you may not want to know, but there it is. And it’s good to know these things. Dealing with hurtful words is one of the basic aspects of developing endurance. The Buddha says there are two types of things you need to learn how to endure. One is hurtful words and the other is painful sensations. Because if you can’t endure these things, there’s no place you can go and find any peace, any happiness. So even though we don’t like them, we have to learn how to endure them. Accept that they’re there, and yet not suck them in. This is one of the reasons why the Buddha began his instructions to his son by saying, “Make the mind like earth.” You can throw disgusting things on the earth and the earth doesn’t shrink away. This is the beginning of meditation. Because a lot of negative things are going to come up in your meditation. You’ll see things about yourself you don’t like, and you’ll be dealing with all the critical voices in your head. And you have to learn how not to reverberate with these critical voices, and how not to let the painful things soak into the mind. One of the images they give of a good meditator is someone whose mind is like a lotus leaf. A lotus leaf has lots of tiny little hairs, so tiny that drops of water can’t seep into the leaf. They roll around and then just fall right off. So you’re in contact with these things just as the leaf is in contact with the water. But you don’t want to soak these things in, absorb these things into the mind. This is one of the problems with hurtful words, is that they tend to slip right into the voices of your mind. So you want to learn how not to identify with those. John Lee gives you a good analogy. He says that all little germs and worms and things in your body go through your blood vessels, and as they go through your brain, maybe your mind is picking up the thoughts of those things. And all your old karmic debt collectors, maybe there are some spirits hovering around you with some nasty things to say. In other words, learn how not to identify with these things. Learn how to depersonalize the situation. This lesson applies both inside and outside. When something really negative happens, when people start criticizing you and shouting at you or saying sly, insinuating things, just tell yourself, “An unpleasant contact or an unpleasant sound has made contact at the ear. Just leave it at that.” For most of us, we can’t leave it at that. We want to know, “Why are they thinking that horrible thing about me? Why don’t they respect me? Why do they hate me?” And it goes on and on and on. There’s one word and it just reverberates, even though they may have said the word a long time ago and forgotten about it. Still, it’s reverberating around in your head. So the question is, who’s actually making you suffer? You have to realize that you’re playing an important role in continuing that, because the word wouldn’t reverberate if you weren’t bringing it back and back. So you’ve got to see why you do this. Learn to develop the observer that can step back and watch the process, both the external word and then the internal reverberation. Ask yourself, “Why do you suck it in? Why do you internalize these things?” The things that people have spit out. Words do come out of people’s mouths, just like things they spit out. And then you pick it up and you start eating it. And who’s to blame for the suffering there? People are going to spit things out. That’s one of the things people can do with their mouths. But why do you have to pick it up and chew on it? And what they say may be true. It may be horrible, and it may be backed up with unkind intentions. But you don’t have to make yourself suffer from those things. Why does your happiness have to depend on their good opinion of you? So learn how to take apart the assumptions that cause you to reverberate. These are unpleasant things. This is one of the basic principles in training the mind. Otherwise, the negative things slip into your mind and you start tormenting yourself with them. And regardless of what the other person says, if you have to ask yourself, “Why am I doing this? Why am I weighing myself down? This is a form of suffering. What’s the craving? What’s the clinging?” If the criticism is unfair, think of all the other people who have been unfairly criticized throughout the world. Even the Buddha was unfairly criticized. Even he couldn’t escape criticism. Who are we? So as with all the other phenomena of the world—material gain, material loss, loss of status, pleasure and pain—you have to accept the fact that these things are there in the world, but you don’t claim them as you or as yours. Because when you do that, you’re taking in a lot of suffering. So try to develop in your mind the sense of well-being that can come from staying with a breath and giving yourself a really good, comfortable place to stay so that when these words come, you’re not tempted to go out and feed on them. It’s a lot better to feed on hearing inside your sense of the body, inside the energy field of the body. And when you don’t feed on all that other stuff, you’re not going to get sick. The principle is as simple as that. But of course, we don’t like to leave things simple. We have all kinds of convolutions. There are many, many polluted reasons for making yourself suffer. It’s one of the reasons why dependent-core arising is so complex. But you don’t have to know all the complexities. Just notice the particular ways in which you latch on to things, the sorts of things that really get to you. And that’s the place where you can work. Give yourself the will of being that comes from concentration, the clarity that comes from getting the mind to settle down. You put yourself in a position of strength where you really can work through these things. So you get to be like the Buddha no matter where you are. You’re perfectly fine. People praise you. The mind doesn’t leap up at the praise. People criticize you. The mind doesn’t get weighed down by the criticism. One of the Buddha’s images is of a person who’s awakened. He says, “When struck by unpleasant words, you don’t reverberate. You’re like a broken gong. You hit the broken gong with a mallet and it doesn’t reverberate at all.” It’s a John Lee’s image. So if you put other people’s words into practice, words first and the state of your mind second, it’s like putting zeros behind numbers. They get to be huge numbers. But if you put the state of your mind first and keep it healthy, it’s like putting the zeros in front of numbers. They don’t count. They’re just the number, and you’re not amplifying it. So learn how to keep the peace of your mind first. Whatever comes by, you can watch. If there’s anything good, pick it up. Good not just in the sense of being pleasant, but giving you a good lesson. Because sometimes people’s criticism is very useful. As the Buddha said, someone who points out your faults, if they really are your faults, regard that person as someone who points out treasure. Because it’s so hard to see your own faults and to admit them so we can work on them. And if there’s no value to what the person says, you can leave it alone. Learning how to think in these ways clears up a lot of mess that the mind can create for itself.

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