A Becoming Critic

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Pali has the word bhava, which means becoming, and the word bhava, which means an emotional state. And they’re very close. Bhava, becoming, is basically a sense of your identity in a particular world of experience. And these worlds can be either the world outside, or when you think about it, about the world outside it’s actually many different worlds, and they’re all the worlds inside your mind. And even though they’re inside your mind, once you get into them, they surround you. They become not only a mental experience, but also a bodily experience. Sometimes they’re centered on sensuality, sometimes they’re centered simply on the fact of taking on an identity, and sometimes they’re centered on the desire to destroy an identity you’ve got. And all this applies to your emotional states as well. As the Buddha said, any craving that gives rise to becoming is going to give rise to suffering too. So they’re an important thing to understand in our quest to put an end to suffering. How we create these worlds of becoming. Because if you simply try to destroy them, you take on a new identity as the destroyer. That leads to more becoming. The Buddha pointed this out as one of his special insights. The people who try to find oblivion in their meditation are simply creating more states of becoming. So you can’t just blank out and say that you’re done with everything. You’ve got to understand, how do these states of becoming get started in the mind? And one of the reasons we meditate is so we get to know these states of becoming well. Because we’re going to be creating a state of becoming as we meditate. There’s you, the meditator. You’re identifying with your intention to get the mind to settle down, to stay with the breath. And then you’ve got the body here as your world of experience. As for the world outside, that’s relevant only to the extent that it’s either conducive to the meditation or not conducive to the meditation. An airplane goes by and makes a lot of noise. And in this world of meditation, it’s a disturbance. But in the world of commerce, in the world of business, maybe it’s doing something useful. So it’s a disturbance to you. It plays another role in other people’s worlds. This is where there’s a lot of conflict among us. We have different worlds that we’re living in. And sometimes our worlds are helpful to one another. And sometimes they get in the way. As long as you can keep a balanced sense of the fact that you’re centering your mind, it doesn’t have to depend on things outside. Here comes a helicopter. Right on cue. It’s up to you to maintain your original intention that you’re going to stay with the breath. As for the helicopter, it’s doing its own business. And you don’t have to comment on it. You don’t have to have anything to do with it at all. It’s not staying here. And as she was practicing being serious about her meditation, she practiced what she called “sense restraint.” And she was upset because other people were talking. “They don’t know that they know I’m practicing sense restraint,” she said. It was up to her to restrain her senses. It wasn’t up to other people to restrain them for her. So we can’t expect a helicopter to skirt the monastery so it doesn’t make any noise. You’re here focusing on what you’ve got to do. And a good part of concentration is learning how to concentrate no matter what the circumstances are around you. Now we try to create an ideal environment here, or as close to an ideal as we can, making it quiet, having a set of values that recognizes the worth of this practice. But for concentration to be really good, you have to be able to do it whenever and wherever. So try to be up for the challenges. And try to be very conscious about what you’re doing, how you’re putting the state of this becoming together. It’s the way you breathe, it’s the way you talk to yourself, the images you hold in mind, the perceptions sometimes that are verbal perceptions that you hold in mind, the feelings you focus on. Notice how you put this together. It’s like learning to be a film critic. You don’t just watch the film for the sake of the content or the enjoyment. You’re trying to figure out how did they put this together? Did they do a good job? Learning to meditate is like going to a film class and learning about the art of filmmaking. So when you’re watching a film, you’re not totally immersed in the story. You’re also more and more conscious of how the director put things together, what the actors were trying to do, how the film editing helped or did not help, what the photographer was up to. You try to see all the different elements of how the film was put together. You know that gives you some distance from the story. It actually can enhance your appreciation of what’s going on. This is precisely the skill you’re going to need as you look at your other becomings as they come into the mind. You want to see how they’re put together. And one of the first things you have to learn to look for is what the Buddha calls the allure. In more common English, we call it the hook. These little stirrings appear in your breath and they appear in your mind. And something about them pulls you in. What was that? Look for that. The Buddha wants you to see things in terms of dependent co-arising. You don’t have to know all the different steps. But basically the principle is that these becomings, which are like worlds that we live in, like homes that we live in, are constructed. Constructed out of intentions and acts of attention. Feelings, perceptions. The way you breathe. And there are certain steps that things go through leading up to these states of becoming. There’s one analysis where the Buddha talks about how we move from craving to clinging and then it goes to becoming. And it answers a question that often gets asked. What precisely is the difference between clinging and craving? Well, one, look at the words. The word for craving in Pali, dhanha, can also mean thirst. The word for clinging, upadana, can also mean feeding. That gives you an idea right there. Craving is for something you don’t have. Clinging is for something you do have. And you’re afraid that it’s going to leave you. And there’s one analysis where the Buddha talks about how from craving there comes seeking. You’re thirsty for something, so you look for it. Then you acquire it. And then you ascertain it. In other words, you figure out, is this what I was looking for? And sometimes it was what you were looking for, and sometimes it’s not. And when it’s not, you have to decide, well, am I going to use it anyhow? Or am I going to throw it away and look for something else? But when you finally decide that it is going to serve your purposes, that’s when you feel passion and desire for it. And this is the passion that comes from wanting to hold on. And there’s a desire for it to stay. And based on that, you get possessive. And when you’re possessive, you get defensive. And then there’s all the conflict that comes as you try to fight off anyone who might try to take away what you’ve got, whether it’s an actual person outside or something inside. Now the Buddha lays out all these steps. These are the steps that lead up to becoming. It’s like looking at a house and realizing it’s made out of paper mache, bits of feathers, sticks. In other words, things that you can’t really depend on, you can’t really rely on. The purpose of this is to develop a sense of dispassion. Why would you want to move in, no matter how alluring it is? They build a house that’s made out of paper mache, bits of newspaper. You know it’s going to rain. You know it’s going to all dissolve at some point. So no matter how attractive they make it, you realize, OK, this isn’t worth it. That’s how you develop dispassion. And that’s what the Buddha is aiming at. As he said, when you know that something is Dhamma, when it leads to dispassion. And dispassion is actually the highest of all Dhammas. So how did the Buddha know this? He stepped back. He stepped out of his becomings and looked at how they were constructed, the same way that the film critic tries to decide, well, how did they put this movie together? So engaging in becoming criticism, not for the purpose of further enjoying the becomings, but for actually deciding we’ve had enough. Because you try to move into these worlds and then they collapse on you. And yet we’re afraid not to move into worlds because we’re afraid if we don’t move in, there will be nothing. The Buddha is trying to assure you that when you give up on this process, there’s actually something better. So we get into concentration, both so we can make the mind quiet enough to see these processes, and also that we can understand the construction of concentration itself, as an example of how becoming happens. Because it is made out of intentions, your intention to stay. Acts of attention, you’re attending to the breath. You’re trying to not pay attention to other things that would distract you. You’ve got the perceptions that hold you here, the feelings that give some attraction to the concentration. You’re trying to put all these things together. And it’s a principle that things you know best are the things you do, the things that you make. That’s what we’re trying to do here. Put together a state of concentration so you can understand. This is how concentration is put together. It’s how it’s fabricated. This is how all states of becoming are fabricated. And you really comprehend it, as the Buddha said, then there’s no more passion for it. Because you see how ephemeral the whole thing is, how unreliable it is. You see that there is a lot of suffering that goes along with it. If it were a totally innocent activity, that would be one thing. But here you think about all the identities that people take on, and how distraught they are when those identities are taken away from them. This has happened to you many, many times. The question is, do you still keep wanting to go for it? It’s like King Gauravya. After reflecting on aging, illness, and death, Ratabala poses a question for him. If someone were to come and say, “There’s another kingdom that you could conquer, even though you’re old and decrepit and about to die, would you go for it?” And the king says, “Sure, why not?” “Can you go east, west, south, north, kingdom on the other side of the ocean? Sure, sure, sure.” That’s blindness. As the Dhamma summary says, we’re a slave to craving. The whole purpose of the teaching is for us to understand how craving makes us a slave and how we can free ourselves. What are the steps? This is where we get the mind in a position where it can step back, step out of the content of its worlds, all the narratives that pull us in. All the narrative hooks, the positive things that we think we can get out of becoming, and even the negative things. We can get ourselves into really foul emotions and not want to leave, prepared that we’ll have nothing. That’s how blind we are. So we want to learn how to step back. And engage in some becoming criticism. Understand how these things are put together. So you can really comprehend them and say, “Okay, I’ve had enough.” And there, the Buddha says, that’s where you’re going to find the ultimate happiness. It’s in an unexpected place. But then if happiness were in all the expected places, we would have found satisfaction a long time ago. It’s because it’s in this unexpected place that we’ve been traveling around for who knows how many eons. But now here’s the way out.

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