Positive Capability

January 17, 2025

The romantics had a concept they called negative capability. The ability just to be with things and not trying to figure things out. Just to appreciate basic sensory impressions. And be content to stay there. This concept has had a big influence on how Buddhism is understood here in the West. A lot of people approach meditation as a process of developing negative capability. Just to be with things as they are. Not to pass judgment on them. Not to try to figure them out. Which is very ironic, because you look into the teachings of the forest masters especially, and they have a very active approach to meditation. There’s a Dhamma talk in which the Jamma Board defines Vipassana. As exploration. You’re trying to figure out why is the mind suffering? What is it doing to make itself suffer? How can it stop? It takes the four noble truths as questions. Buddha points our attention in the right direction. We’re looking for the cause of suffering. We’re not going to be looking outside. We have to look inside. We have to look at our cravings. See, why do we crave things? He has you look for the allure of something. That’s precisely what he’s focusing on. Why do you crave these things? You think of that passage we chanted just now. The four Dhamma summaries. It was given to a king. He was asking a monk, “Why didn’t you ordain?” Because he was under the impression that people ordained. Because they’d lost family, they’d lost wealth, their health was bad. And basically what it came down to is, as the monk replied, was realizing there’s this problem of craving. We live in this world where there’s aging, illness, death. And we keep wanting to come back for more. And the teachings of the Buddha give us an opportunity to explore that question. Why? Why do we do this? It’s going to take a lot of figuring out because the mind is very subtle. As a John Chauvin said, “One of the first things you learn when you watch the mind is how much it lies to itself.” So you don’t just sit there with the lies and say, “Well, the lies are like this.” Try to figure out, well, what are they misrepresenting? What are they hiding? Because all too often the allure is something we’re not aware of. We’re not very proud of. The Buddha teaches us the concepts or the perceptions of inconstancy, stress, not-self. Not just to say, “Well, this is how things are.” But to point out the drawbacks of the things that we find attractive. And to figure out why, even though we’ve been told these things many, many times, we still go for them. Like the case with King Arabia. Radhabala had him reflect on how he used to be strong, but now he can’t even decide where to put his foot. He wants to put his foot in one place and it goes someplace else. When he’s sick he can’t ask his courtiers, even though they have to depend on him, he can’t ask them to share out some of his pain. So there’s the teachings on inconstancy, stress. As for his wealth, he can’t take it with him when he goes. He’s going to die. So he’s been reflecting. He’s reflecting on this. But still he wants to come back for more. He has the opportunity to conquer another kingdom, even on the other side of the ocean. He’d go for it. Eighty years old. He’s a fool. But so are we all. We keep coming back, coming back, coming back. And we have an opportunity to understand why. It may take time to get out, figure things out, but it also takes time not to figure things out. It takes a lot more time. It’s like realizing you’re stuck in prison and you want to get out. And you realize it’s going to take a lot of work, a lot of subtle work. How are you going to find a tool to dig your hole? And how do you know exactly where to dig the hole and not be found? Other people say, “Well, all that effort for getting out is a lot easier just to accept the fact that you’re in prison. Prison is like this.” Be accepting. But you’re still stuck in prison. If you try to get out, at least there’s hope. And the Buddha is saying there is a way out. You may run into all kinds of weird things on the ground. You can dig a tunnel in one direction. Ah, you run into a foundation. So you have to turn around and try another direction. But you want to keep your desire to get out as strong as possible. And you have to learn the patience that goes with that. You say, “This is a long-term process. I have to be patient, but I also have to be inquisitive.” For a lot of us, that’s a hard combination. Well, that’s what we have to learn. If you’re going to get out, you have to master the skills for getting out. You’ve probably seen escape movies. It takes a long, complicated process to figure out how to dig the tunnel to get out, how to slip out without being detected. But when you get out, it’s worth it. And you’ve learned a lot in the process. Much more than simply saying, “Well, this is what prison is like.” You’ll learn to accept it. We’re not here to anesthetize ourselves. We’re here to become more perceptive. More inquisitive. Things that we ordinarily take for granted, we want to start questioning them. When you say, “I like this,” and you say, “Well, of course I like this. Who wouldn’t like this?” Well, our hearts don’t let that liking or disliking get in the way of getting beyond these things. So it’s something you’ve got to learn. And that “of course” you have. You’ve got to watch out for that attitude. Because it hides all kinds of things. It imposes restrictions on you. The Buddha says, “When you define yourself, you’re placing limitations on yourself.” When you simply accept things, you’re placing limitations on yourself. There are some things that Buddha has you accept. The fact that there is pain in life. The fact that there are going to be people saying nasty things to you. The fact that when you look back on your past behavior, you’ll see that there have been mistakes. All these things you learn to accept. But as for the unskillful qualities in the mind that are causing you to suffer, the Buddha says, “Don’t accept those.” I came across a book one time on the Four Noble Truths, in which the author was saying that we’re not here to get rid of craving. We’re here to learn how to live with it and be okay with it. I translated that for John Sawatt. He said, “The author is teaching people to be stupid.” The Buddha’s not here to teach us to be stupid. He’s teaching us how to figure things out. How to figure out what are the right questions to ask to get out. And gives us the tools for examining where attachments are. The things that keep us imprisoned. Because that’s the big irony. This is one of the reasons why fire was an image that they used many times. They believed that fire was an element that existed in all things. And when you provoked it, it would latch on to fuel and start burning. And it was trapped in the fuel because it was clinging to the fuel. The fuel was not trapping it. It was trapping itself in the fuel through its clinging. The same way the mind traps itself with its clinging. That’s why it’s in prison. And getting out of prison requires letting go. And letting go, of course, is a lot more complicated than we might think. You can’t just say, “Well, let go and be gone.” As we’re saying today, the mind is like a parliament. It’s got lots of different politicians with lots of different agendas. And one member of the parliament may be holding on for one reason, and another member of parliament may be holding on for another reason. It’s very meticulous work taking these things apart. But again, what else are you going to do in prison? Just sit there? You’ve got the skills to get out. And if you don’t have the skills yet, you can develop them. What we’re doing here is not humanly impossible. As the Buddha said, if this path of abandoning unskillful qualities and developing skillful ones wasn’t possible, he wouldn’t teach it. And if it didn’t lead to real happiness, he wouldn’t teach it either. So he’s basically saying, you can do it and it’s going to be good for you. You’ve got to keep that attitude in mind all the time, whatever you do, wherever you go. It’s in that way you can hope to be free. So we’re developing positive capability here. We do have to figure things out. But take joy in that. Think of it as being a puzzle that you enjoy learning how to solve. You learn a lot in the process, and you have freedom as your reward.

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