Accepting Criticism

October 23, 2019

When you meditate, there are three qualities you have to work on—persistence, concentration, and equanimity. Persistence is when you try to give rise to good qualities in the mind. I once said there you’re trying to maintain them. As for unskillful things that come into the mind, you have to make the effort to get rid of them. Now, getting rid of them sometimes simply means not focusing on them, not giving them any attention. In other words, you starve them. But you don’t just sit and watch them coming and going and say, “I’ll learn how to be content with that.” That’s the wrong kind of contentment. You’ve got to be active. You’ve got to be active, proactive, and say “no” to a lot of things that come into the mind. Learning which things to say “no” to, which things to say “yes” to, that’s a large part of discernment. But persistence is the effort that you put in. Concentration is just being still. Being intent on one thing. The other one thing is the breath. Any thoughts that are not related to the breath right now, you can let them go. Ask yourself how the breathing feels, whether it’s comfortable. If it is comfortable, how do you maintain it? If it’s not comfortable, why do you change? If the breath gets more comfortable, how do you make the most of it? For some people, making the most of it means wallowing in a sense of ease, in which case they lose their concentration. The best thing you can do with that sense of comfort is to spread it around. Because you’re going to be trying to develop a whole-body awareness as your concentration develops. And to be with the whole body, it has to feel good. So you can think of the breath energy as allowing that sense of comfort to flow through the different nerves and muscles of the body. But you stay right there with the topic of breath. Anything outside the skin of the body right now is totally irrelevant. Try to make the entire world of your interest simply the world of the body as you feel it from within. Then equanimity is what watches over this. It decides when the results are good and when the results are bad. You need to have some basic equanimity that will admit to itself, “Yes, it’s bad. Something needs to be done.” Then you can tell the difference between what’s bad and what’s good. Equanimity is not knocked away or knocked over by times when things are not going well. Equanimity is very closely allied with patience. So there are three qualities you have to bring into balance. Persistence, concentration, and equanimity. The Buddha gives an analogy of a goldsmith. Sometimes the goldsmith has to put the gold into the fire so it will melt. If it doesn’t melt, he won’t be able to shape it into what he wants it to be. Other times he cools it. And other times he simply watches it, looks at the gold to figure out where there are imperfections and to decide what needs to be done. So sticking it in the fire, that’s like the persistence. Cooling it is like the concentration. And examining it, that’s what equanimity is for. If you’re the type of person who doesn’t like to see things not go the way you want them, then either you tend to go into denial or you get upset. And when you’re upset, you can’t bring the right amount of finesse and care to the practice. You just shove things around. Now, if the goldsmith simply put the gold in the fire, it would burn. If he simply put it in the water to cool it, he wouldn’t be able to shape it into what he wanted. And if he simply sat there and watched it, nothing would happen. So you have to bring these three qualities together. Equanimity, for a lot of us, is the hardest one. A lot of the jhans in Thailand noticed when Westerners came that equanimity is something they really lack. So there’s a lot of training that goes into that. And it’s a virtue you develop both in the meditation and in your dealings with other people. The Buddha singles it out as something you develop in your interaction with others that’s going to be beneficial to you. If you can develop equanimity in your dealings with other people, then it’s easier to develop it in your meditation. One of the things we don’t like, and we should learn how to be more equanimous about, is when other people criticize us. Pride gets in the way. Then we don’t really listen. We’re more upset the fact that someone is focusing on our errors. As a result, we don’t learn from the criticism. You may have noticed in the passes we’ve chanted just now that one of the prerequisites for goodwill practice is that you be easy to instruct. In the Dhammapada they talk about how someone who points out your faults is like someone who points out treasure to you. In other words, areas where you haven’t been noticing that you are lacking, or there’s something wrong in your behavior. If nobody points it out to you, you’re never going to be able to correct it. That’s a treasure. But when they do point it out, all too often people come to meditation with the idea that they have certain character traits they want to deal with. And then the teacher points out other traits, and they get upset. But the whole point of it is that this is a training. And one of the best things you can get from someone else is someone to help you see your blind spots. So you have to learn how to take criticism with equanimity. It doesn’t mean you have to follow it all the time. But as Jean Turing said, an attitude of respect, where you’re willing to listen to somebody, is a sign of intelligence. Because maybe their criticism this time may not be all that useful, but the fact that you’re willing to listen to criticism, maybe they’ll be willing to offer something else that will be more useful. But if you cut them off the first time around, they may decide they don’t want to bother the second time. And so you don’t learn. I knew a woman in Thailand one time. She’d been a godmother of a fishing village and kind of been the mafia since. And a lot of her life was governed by her desire to maintain what she saw as her sense of honor. It was the kind of honor that, “If anyone tries to do something wrong to me, they’re going to regret it.” That kind of honor. Unfortunately, she came to her senses and she said she looked around and she couldn’t see where the honor was. And so she was able to let that attitude go. So you have to look at your pride. What in pride is worth holding on to? If it gets in the way of learning, it’s not going to be helpful at all. The kind of self-view that says, “I’m already good,” sets you up for disaster. The ideal one is the kind of person who’s always willing to learn. That kind of self-view can be really useful on the path. And it requires equanimity as you listen to criticism and as you realize you do have faults. But then, as with the practice of concentration, you don’t just sit there with the equanimity. You try to be persistent in overcoming that fault and you focus on it. It’s a combination of persistence, concentration, and equanimity. And when you develop these qualities in your dealings with other people, then you can bring them inside. And they’ll be useful in your meditation. You can shape something out of your mind. John Lee likes to give the analogy many times that when the mind settles down, it becomes more malleable. That’s a word that you actually find in the Pali Canon. And then when it’s malleable, you can turn it into anything you want. You can turn it into the first jhana, the second jhana, the third jhana, the fourth jhana. There are many other potentials in the mind that come from being persistent in overcoming its faults. We’re here to change our behavior. That’s what the message of the Four Noble Truths is. You’re looking for happiness in the wrong way. You’re behaving in an unskillful way. But you can change your ways. And some of the ways you change are ones that you already know that you have to do it. Others are going to be ones that you’re not aware of, which is why it’s good to have input from outside. There’s that story that comes in the Canon. But when the Buddha was practicing, it’s not in the Canon. It’s in the commentaries. When the Buddha was practicing his austerities, he realized it was not working. Then he heard somebody playing the lute, first with the string too tight, then with the string too loose, then with the string just right. Just that much he was able to learn from it. He took that experience as his teacher. That’s the case of someone who’s willing to learn and looking at all kinds of places. So instruction doesn’t necessarily have to come from the teacher to be worthwhile. If you listen in fairness and realize that what the other person has said is right, then it doesn’t matter who’s been giving you the good advice. You take it. That way you provide a good foundation for your good will and good practice for the skills you’re going to need as you meditate. This is one of the practices that’s not just meditation. It has to do with how you relate to people in all areas. So try to make sure that your skills are all around.

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