Benefitting from Criticism

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In my first years at Wat Thammasat, there was another monk who would spend a lot of time with John Phuong. It seemed to me he was getting away with all kinds of things. If I tried doing the things he did, I’d always get sharply criticized. It first struck me as unfair. Why was it that he got away with these things and I couldn’t? Then I finally realized I was getting training. He wasn’t. I learned from a basic principle of the forest tradition that when the teacher criticizes a student, he’s not criticizing the student per se. He’s criticizing the student’s defilements. And it’s good to make that distinction. He’s criticizing because he sees that the student is willing to learn. He has the capacity to learn. The people who don’t have that capacity don’t get criticized. I visited Ajahn Mahaprabhu one time after Ajahn Phuong had passed away. I went with the monk who had visited Ajahn Mahaprabhu many times. And in the course of the half hour we were there, I got criticized three times. Later that night, the other monk was the monk who was giving a Dhamma talk. This was at Wat Asokanam. And halfway there, he didn’t see me. He was talking about the event, about how jealous he was. He’d been seeing Ajahn Mahaprabhu, and Ajahn Mahaprabhu didn’t even care enough to criticize him once ever. I’d gone there just once and gotten criticized three times. So it’s important you understand this principle, that if you can separate yourself from the defilement, then Ajahn has done a good job. He’s pointing out that there’s something that you’re doing that’s not quite right. And he cares enough to point it out. And once you see that it’s not right, it’s a good time to let it go. It’s a good lesson in not-self. Ajahn Mahaprabhu made a comparison with a boxing instructor. He sees any places where the student leaves himself open, he’ll kick him right there, punch him right there. Not because he wants to kick or wants to punch, but he’s warning, “Don’t open yourself up there.” In other words, “Don’t be open to greed, aversion, and delusion right there.” And sometimes you get criticized and you don’t see what you’ve done wrong, which means you have to take it back and think about it. One of the big lessons I got from Ajahn Foong was how to address a request or question to a senior monk. I’d come up in the evening to fix up his hut, and if I had any questions, that was the time to ask. But there were times I’d start a question and he’d cut me short. There would be no opportunity for questions that day. And I finally realized it was the way I phrased things. So as I was going up the hill to his hut, I’d have to think, “What’s the best way to phrase this so it doesn’t sound like I’m imposing on him or expecting him to do something that I should be doing myself, or all the other things you have to think about when you’re addressing a senior monk?” And it stood me in good stead. Years later, I was taking part in a project to print a book for the big commemoration for Ajahn Lee when they moved his body from the old cellar at Wat Asokanam to the large wihan. I appointed a committee to put together a book that would be printed and then handed out. The committee met once and decided I should be the one to do the job. So I was called in. I laid out the plan for the book and wanted to run it past the abbot. So I took the chairman of the committee with me. When we arrived there, the chairman of the committee opened the discussion in a way that I immediately knew was wrong from all my time with Ajahn Foong. That snapped right back at me. “We appointed the committee to do the work. Why are you giving me the work?” So I stepped in immediately and said, “No, we’re not asking you to do the work. We’ve actually done the work already. We just want to run it past you.” He turned to me and talked to me perfectly nicely. From that point on, I learned, one, not to take the chairman of the committee with me. The next time I talked to the abbot, I realized that Ajahn Foong had been training me. He taught me how to deal with difficult situations or difficult people in the future. So the purpose of criticism, as you’re practicing, is not to put you down. It’s to encourage you. On the one hand, as I said, to show that the teacher cares and sees that you’re willing and able to learn. And also to make you think, “This thing I think I’m doing is right. Maybe it’s not right. Maybe it’s right after all.” Those are sometimes the hardest lessons to learn, but often the most important. Because a lot of opinions we have about what’s right and what’s wrong, if we don’t step back from them, we’re going to suffer from them and do a lot of unskillful things because of them. So this is a good lesson in not-self. This is something to let go. You don’t have to identify with it. If you do identify with it, you’re going to get hit. You’re leaving yourself open. And if your pride gets in the way, then that’s something else you have to let go of. And Jnanadhamma tells a great story about his early years with Ajahn Chah. One day he was coming back from the alms round, and another one of the Western monks came up to him and started gossiping about some of the other monks there at the monastery. Ajahn Jnanadhamma didn’t want to hear this, so he moved away. But it put him in a foul mood. As he was coming back to the monastery, he ran into Ajahn Chah, who saw him and said, “Good morning,” in English. Apparently, living with Ajahn Chah, there are hundreds of monks. It was very rare that you got addressed by Ajahn Chah like that. So it lifted his spirits. He decided that night he wanted to massage Ajahn Chah’s feet. So he went, and the monks were sitting in a circle around Ajahn Chah, asking questions about this and that. Ajahn Chah saw Ajahn Jnanadhamma come, so he told the other monks to go and do their evening chanting while Jnanadhamma was going to massage his feet. So he sat there massaging Ajahn Chah’s feet. For a while, nothing was said. He was thinking to himself, “What an ideal opportunity this was. There’s the sound of the chanting in the background. There’s Ajahn Chah massaging the feet of an arahant. I think this is about as close to heaven as it gets on the human realm.” All of a sudden, he was massaging one of Ajahn Chah’s feet, and Ajahn Chah took the other foot and kicked him in the chest, stomped on him in the chest, and said, “Look, don’t let your state of mind depend on the words of other people. In other words, don’t let the other person’s words get you down, or even Ajahn’s good morning. Don’t let that get your spirits up. If the words of other people have that big an influence on your mind, you’re setting yourself up for a fall.” So Ajahn Jnanadhamma says he’s really proud of the fact that he has Ajahn Chah’s footprint stamped on his chest, which is a sign of Ajahn’s compassion. That’s the right attitude to have. The criticism is meant to improve. It’s not meant to tear down. And as long as you understand that principle, you can benefit from it.

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