Criticism 101

May 19, 2020

There’s a paradox in the Buddhist teachings on criticism. On the one hand, he tells you not to take criticism too seriously. Don’t grab onto it. Don’t get upset by it. And on the other hand, he says to take it to heart. But actually, the paradox is more apparent than real. If you get upset by criticism, you’re not going to hear it. You’re going to hear the fact that somebody said something about you that you didn’t like. And then they’re going to go running off into why they might say something you might not like. And very rarely do you actually hear what the criticism is, and that way you don’t learn from it. This is why the Buddha taught Rahul at the very beginning of his meditation. Meditation instructions make your mind like earth. The word for “earth” in Pali actually has several words, and one of them is kamma, which relates to the word for “patience” and “endurance.” If you can endure something, you can actually see what it is. If you can’t endure it, all you see is your reaction. This is a principle that applies outside as well as inside. When you’re meditating, things come up in the mind. You try different techniques, and you want the first technique to work. But maybe it doesn’t. If all you can think about is how frustrated you are that the first technique didn’t work, it gets in the way of you finding a second technique. Or when you think something does work, you want to check it to make sure it really does. If you’re not paying careful attention, you may start thinking you’re doing something well. And over the long term, it becomes more and more apparent that no, it’s not. But if you started out with a mind like earth, in other words, you tried something out and you already had the attitude, “We’re trying this out.” And the attitude, “If it doesn’t work, we’ll find something else,” you can bring that attitude in. Then you can see more clearly when things do work and when they don’t. As for outside, if you can make your mind like earth toward criticism, you can actually hear what’s being said. Your reaction is not getting in the way. And then you have the chance to give it a more fair evaluation. Is it worth listening to or not? We sometimes think of endurance as being the virtue of dumb animals. In other words, they don’t have the intelligence to react, so they just put up with things. But that’s not the kind of endurance the Buddha’s talking about. If you go around carrying burdens like an ox, you’re going to begin to realize you’re not an ox. And you’re going to break down. You have to learn how not to carry these things. Think of the images at the beginning of the Dhammapada. The Buddha uses them to indicate the difference between your good karma and your bad karma. He says your good karma follows you like a shadow. It’s weightless. You don’t have to do anything. You don’t have to drag it. It follows you on its own. Your bad karma is like a cart that you have to pull, and it wipes out your footprints. In other words, it gets in the way of the good you’d like to do. Learn how to think of criticism as a shadow. It’s there to give you guidance if you decide that it’s worthwhile. But you don’t have to carry it around. And don’t think of it as a weight. One of the reasons we find it so hard to go through the world is we keep weighing ourselves down, weighing ourselves down. And then someone else puts a piece of straw in our back and we blame the straw. We have to think about all that we’re doing to weigh ourselves down, with our attitude about how other people should look at us, and our attitude about how we want to look in the eyes of other people, and the kind of self-image we have. You want to have a self-image that’s not destroyed by criticism. And the best one to have is the self-image that says, “I’m proud to learn, proud to be willing to learn.” That was the attitude that the Buddha was trying to inculcate in Rahula. From the very beginning, you start out with intentions, you check your intentions, and only if they seem right do you act on them. And when you act on them, or you have acted on them, and you see that there was some harm that you did that you didn’t expect, well, you go over and talk it over with somebody. You’re not too proud to talk it over, because you take pride in the fact that you’re willing to learn. That way you can benefit from other people’s criticism and you can benefit from their praise. Sometimes we’re as damaged by praise as we are by criticism, because we take it wrong. And here again, if you have the attitude that you’re the sort of person who’s willing to learn, what is there in the praise that I should take to heart? Then you can also start wondering, “The person who praised me, what do they want out of me?” If we’re an ordinary reactionist, we like people who praise us and dislike people who criticize us. We’re going to get fooled very easily. As the Buddha said, someone who points out your faults is like someone who’s pointed out a treasure. If it turns out that there really are faults, then you know what you have to work on. Of course, with someone who praises you, they may want something out of you. And you’re not going to see that if you just allowed yourself to get popped up by the praise. So here again, having a mind like earth is helpful. Good things get poured on the earth and the earth doesn’t swell up to meet them. They are just what they are. And then the question is, what’s the best use you can make out of that? And if you can control your reaction enough so you can actually see what was given to you, then you can realize whether this is a gift or not, with a lot more fairness. So learn to see endurance as a real strength, as a real virtue. It’s something that allows you to learn and see yourself as someone who’s willing to learn. When I was with the jhana-furing, he found all my weak points. He let me know very clearly when they were, where they were, what they were. At first I was upset. But then I began to realize, “Okay, here’s my chance to learn.” The laypeople who came to visit the monastery later told me they felt sorry for me because I was constantly getting it from a jhana-furing on one thing or another. I couldn’t ever do anything quite right. But as soon as I realized that I had this fault in my own personality, I was proud of my intelligence. And so when I was finally willing to admit, “Yes, there are a lot of things that I’m stupid about, but I’m not too stupid to learn,” that’s when you can actually learn. And that criticism then becomes something really useful. So try to develop this energy both inside and out, that whatever comes up, you can take it. You take it because you don’t carry it around. It’s there, but you don’t pick it up. You don’t pick it up and weigh yourself down with it. Think of a John Lee’s image of the farmer plowing. If you try to pick up the dirt as it falls off the plow and put it in a bag, you’re going to get bogged down. So you can look at the dirt as it falls off the plow, and it’ll tell you something about the quality of the soil. Learn what you can from it, then let it go. That way, the next piece of criticism that comes along, you’ll be able to learn from that one too. So when the world seems like a hard place to live in, remind yourself that you’re the one who’s making it hard. The mind has the strength to deal with whatever comes up. As long as you don’t weigh it down with unnecessary crap. That’s our problem. It’s like the food we eat. It comes in as food, comes out as crap, and then we carry it around. Who are you going to blame? In other words, our reactivity to things, the way we take something and twist it in our minds, turns into something that’s no good and is just a dead weight. Or if we simply allowed it to pass through and took what was good out of it, we’d be nourished. If you see things in that way, you can live in this world. And it’s not going to be too much to bear.

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