True, Beneficial, Timely

July 16, 2023

There’s a story in the Canon about a group of ascetics called Nikantas who are always trying to find fault with the Buddha. One day a prince, Prince Abhaya, went to see them. And they asked him, “Do you want to become famous?” We have a trick question for you to ask the Kodama contemplative. Ask him if he would ever say anything displeasing. to other people. And he won’t be able to answer yes, he won’t be able to answer no. Because if he answers yes, you can say, “Well what’s the difference between you and just ordinary run-of-the-people in the market?” And if he says no, we have him on record for saying some things about Devadatta that Devadatta didn’t like. He said that Devadatta was going to go to hell. And so when you ask this question, it’s like a two-horned chestnut swallowed. You can’t cough it up, you can’t swallow it. And then the Buddha wouldn’t be able to answer the question and the prince would become famous. So the prince decides to invite the Buddha to his palace for a meal. Then at the end of the meal he comes and sits in front of the Buddha and has one of his baby sons sitting on his lap. Apparently the son was there that if the Buddha said something that the prince found displeasing or something that he couldn’t answer, he would pinch the son, the son would cry, and that would be the end of the conversation. So he put the question to the Buddha. And the Buddha said, “Well there’s no categorical yes or no answer to that question.” And the prince realized that the Nicanjas had been stymied. And he said as much. And so before the Buddha gave his answer, which would be what he called an analytical answer, he cross-questioned the prince first. “Suppose your baby son there got something sharp stuck in his mouth, what would you do?” And the prince said, “Well I would hold his hand, hold his hand in one hand and then with the other hand take my finger and get the sharp object out, even if it meant drawing blood.” “Why is that?” “Because I have compassion for the son.” See the Buddha’s giving a very different image. The Nicanjas wanted to see him with a two-horned chestnut stuck in his throat. But here he’s talking to the prince about being compassionate and getting a sharp object out of someone’s mouth. The Buddha went on to say there are times when people need to hear something harsh, something unpleasant to come to their senses. And you have to say it out of compassion. Basically he said there are three tests for his speech. The first is, is it true or false? If it’s not true then you don’t say it. But then even if it’s true, the next question is, is it beneficial? There’s a lot of true things out there that are not really helpful. Why bother saying them? So he would only say things that are true and beneficial. And then he would look at the right time and place. He would say the right time and place to say things that are pleasing or displeasing. But you look at the rest of his speech and the Canon and you see that there are lots of other issues when the question of time and place come up. So those are good standards for our own speech. Before you say something, ask yourself, is this true? And if it passes the first test, then the second test, is it beneficial? Does it really help the person you’re talking to? Would it really be helpful, genuinely helpful for you? And then the third is, is this the right time and place for this kind of speech? And John Suat used to make a comment about people who didn’t have any filter on their speech at all. He said an idea comes into their head and it should come right out their mouth. And the way he said that, he said that was a sign of a fool. You have to be careful about your speech. And this principle lies not only to your speech outside, but also speech going on in your mind right now, as you’re meditating. It’s not that you’re not going to be thinking at all. You do have to think to get the mind to settle down. So you have to be able to judge what kind of thinking is the kind of thinking you want to engage in right now. What kind do you not want to engage in? You ask yourself those same three questions. First, is it true? Two, is it beneficial? And three, is this the right time and place for that? If you can hold all your thoughts to these tests, it helps get rid of a lot of unnecessary chatter inside. It focuses you on the things that are really useful to say. Because what you say to yourself, the Buddha classifies as directed thought and evaluation. And it’s actually one of the factors of the first jhana, getting into right concentration. You have to talk to yourself about what? Well, you talk to yourself about the breath. Because if you’re going to settle down with the breath, the breath has to be comfortable. It has to feel right in the body right now. It has to be clear enough for the mind to be able to watch it, but gentle enough so that if you feel soothing inside the body. That requires a lot of internal conversation. So talk to yourself about your breath. Is it too long? Too short? Too fast? Too slow? When you picture the breath to yourself, what kind of picture do you have? Someone was telling me this morning that he couldn’t see any breath in his body. I asked him, can you feel your body? You’re sitting here, can you feel it from the inside? He said, oh yeah, no problem. I said, well that’s breath. Hold that perception in mind that what you feel in the body right now starts with breath energy. Then ask yourself, if this were breath energy, would it qualify as good or bad? Because sometimes there are patterns of tension, patterns of blockage that we accept in the body because we think it’s solid. There’s nothing that can be done about it. But if you perceive it as breath, then you can ask yourself, well, would this be good breath? If it’s not good breath, what can I change? And you find that you have new possibilities open to you. And then there comes a point where you realize the breath is as comfortable as you can get it, and then you can ask yourself, do I need to keep talking about it now? And if you see that it’s not going to get any better by talking about it, that’s when you put the thinking aside and just be with the sensation of the breathing. Be fully aware in all parts of the body. That’s another problem we tend to have is that we tend to think that we’re in our heads, looking at the body from a little bit of a distance. But it’s best to think that we’re down in the body, surrounded by the breath. And allow that perception to take hold. And this way you take those habits you have of talking to yourself and you put it to good use. And you learn when you can stop. Because we talk to ourselves in concentration to give rise to a sense of ease, well-being, fullness, refreshment. And when the refreshment kicks in, you feel less need to chatter about it. It just feels really good. Just learn how to appreciate it. Open all your nerves to it so that you can fully receive the benefits of it. And learn how to maintain it. And this way, simply the perception of breath filling the body is enough to keep it going without you having to discuss it too much inside. And this habit that we have of talking to ourselves, which can create so much trouble, we can now convert to good use. That’s a pattern in all the Buddhist teachings. Think of the image of crossing the river. You have to make a raft to get across because there’s no nibbana yacht that’s going to come and pick you up. So where are you going to get the raw materials for the raft? You can’t go over to the other side to get the raw materials. You have to get the raw materials on this side of the river. Twigs and branches here in these aggregates you’ve got. Your habit of talking to yourself is a pile of twigs and branches, and you can make that into a raft if you’re skillful. And that’s what the Buddha’s teaching us, is that we can master these habits as skills, so that instead of creating suffering for ourselves, we can use them to put an end to suffering. And then we can let them go, not out of hatred, not out of neurotic fear. Simply because they’ve taken us as far as we can go with them. They’ve delivered us to a good place. The Buddha says when you let go of the raft on the other side, you still have some appreciation for it. You don’t carry it around, but you do appreciate it. So if anyone else wants to cross the river, you can say, “I did it with this raft and I did it with these twigs and these branches.” You can try it and you can see how far you can get too. [BLANK\_AUDIO]

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