

## *Encouragement*

*February 22, 2023*

There's a famous passage where Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī, the Buddha's stepmother, comes to see the Buddha after her ordination and asks for a brief Dhamma teaching. He teaches her eight principles for deciding what is Dhamma and Vinaya, and what's not.

Those principles can be applied in two directions: One, when you hear somebody teach the Dhamma, you ask yourself, "What kind of behavior would this Dhamma inspire inside me: in my actions, in my relationships with other people, in my own practice, in terms of the goal that I've set, which is for total freedom?"

But you can also apply those principles to your own thoughts, because as you're meditating, directed thought and evaluation are part of the practice. Once you've made up your mind to direct your thoughts to the breath and to evaluate the breath, it's not the case that you'll always be directing them there, or that all thoughts would go in that direction.

So, you want to learn how to evaluate when something comes up in the mind: Is it Dhamma, or is it not? Among the first principles for deciding are the principles we use with regard to speech.

The Buddha was challenged one time as to whether he would say anything displeasing to other people. The challenge was this: If he said that he would, then the response would be, "Well, what's the difference between you and ordinary people out in the market?" If he said he wouldn't, he was on record for having said some things about Devadatta that Devadatta didn't like. So they thought they had the Buddha.

But when the question was posed, he said, "There's no categorical answer to that question." Then he set forth the principles that he would use in deciding what to say: One, it had to be true. Two, it had to be beneficial. And three, he had to choose the right time and place to say something pleasing, and the right time and place to say something displeasing. Now, the displeasing things were not just to put people down or to make them feel bad. They were meant to alert them that something they were doing was very wrong. If they themselves didn't heed the warning, maybe the people who were listening in would.

So, when thoughts come up in the mind as you're sitting here meditating, for the time being the rule is: Anything that's not related to the meditation is not relevant. No matter how true the thought may be, no matter how beneficial it would ordinarily be in other times and places, it's not relevant to what you're doing right now. This is not the right time and place.

As for critical voices that come up, again, ask yourself, "Is this compassionate criticism or uncompassionate?" When the Buddha gave the example of what would be the right time and place to say something displeasing, he gave an analogy: Suppose a child has taken something sharp in its mouth. What do you do? You hold the child's head with one hand, and with your

finger you take the object out even if it means drawing blood. Why is that? Because you have compassion for the child. You don't want the child to swallow it. In the same way, when the Buddha would say something displeasing, it was with a compassionate motive.

So, when critical voices come up in the mind, you can ask yourself, "Are these helpful?" They fall in with one of the principles that the Buddha taught to Mahāpajāpatī, which is that *true Dhamma encourages effort*. And encouraging effort doesn't mean just telling you that you've got to get going. It also means—if it's really encouraging—that you can do this; you're capable of doing this. It's real encouragement.

So, if any critical voices come up while you're meditating, and they're discouraging, if they belittle the good that you've done, belittle you—then, No, those voices are not Dhamma. It's very easy for critical voices to sound like Dhamma because a lot of what the Buddha has to say about our ordinary behavior *is* pretty critical. So much of the path teaches us that we have to abstain from this, abstain from that. And some of the things we're told to abstain from are things we've been doing all along—and we've like doing them.

But again, the criticism is there from a compassionate motive, and it's for the purpose of alerting you that changes need to be made—and you're capable of doing them.

So, when critical voices come up, remember, there are standards for criticism. This self as commentator that you have inside: Remember, you have many selves, and not all of them mean well, not all of them are on the side of the path. Some of them would prefer that you leave the path, so they disguise themselves as Dhamma and make the path seem impossible, or make you seem incapable.

So, as you train yourself, remember, your *self*, as it relates to the path, takes on three main roles. One is the self as producer—the *you* who's capable of doing this. Another is the self as consumer, the *you* who will benefit, will experience happiness as a result of doing the path. And then, the self as commentator. You want your self as commentator to encourage the producer to higher standards, but at the same time, to really encourage—i.e., in the old literal meaning of the word *to encourage*: to give you heart, give you the willpower, give you the confidence that, yes, you can do this.

And it is worthwhile. The good that you've done *is* good—it's just that it could be better.

This is one of the problems of the critical voices: Sometimes they set impossible goals. Or they set a possible goal, but you're not there yet, and they criticize everything you do that falls short of that.

But remember, the path is a path of success by approximation: Every step in the right direction is a step to be encouraged. You know that you're not all the way there yet, but there's value in making progress, heading in the right direction. That way, your self as a consumer has a better and better chance of actually experiencing something of real worth inside.

So, as you're training yourself here on the path, remember, you're training your *selves*: Teach the commentator to be more realistic and genuinely encouraging, so that what it has to

say is genuine Dhamma, i.e., it's encouraging you to put forth extra effort, makes you *want* to put forth extra effort, and helps you figure out how to do it. That's the commentator you want. Then you use the commentator to train the producer—the you that actually sits down and does the work. That way, you'll benefit.

Now, you'll notice there are a lot of "you's" in there, and the question comes up, "Well, what about the teaching on not-self?" You use not-self in the beginning by learning how to not identify with all the unskillful voices or unskillful selves in the mind. But that doesn't mean you drop all sense of self. You can't say, "Well, just let the path do itself." Or, "Let causes and conditions do the path." Causes and conditions acting on their own are not going to get the path done.

Even when the Buddha was teaching not-self to the monks, he said, "Whatever is not yours, let go of it. That will be for your long-term welfare and happiness." Listen to that phrase: *your* long-term welfare and happiness. That's the self as consumer that's going to benefit. You use that as part of your motivation.

As you get further and further on the path, that sense of self will get more and more refined. The happiness you can produce gets more refined. The actions that need to be done get more refined. And the commentator gets more and more refined and precise, until all your selves refine themselves out of a job. That's when you can put them aside.

So, remember, think of your senses of self as strategies, as tools. And look carefully in your toolbox, because some of the tools in the box may actually be harmful. If you look in the toolbox and all you have is a sledgehammer, which smashes everything—well, that doesn't help.

You want to design your tools so that they really do help get the job done. Work on your strategies so that they really do get the job done. This is all something you can do. There's nothing super-human about this.

One of the nice things about the Buddha's teachings is that they were created by someone who knows what it's like to be imperfect. There are other religions where a perfect being comes down and tells you what to do. That being has never understood what it's like to be imperfect.

The Buddha made mistakes. He learned how to recognize his mistakes. And he didn't let his mistakes get him down. In fact, he became Buddha because he learned from his mistakes and kept refining his actions. So he knows what it's like not to be perfect, to be on your way, and how you should give encouragement to yourself every step along the way.

If you don't believe you can do it, it's not going to get done. But belief is a choice, so choose the possibility of awakening. You may not get there in this life, but at least you're headed in the right direction—and a life headed in the right direction is a life well lived.