

Perfection, Elitism and Excellence

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Tips of the Day · 3 min read

What a pain perfection is! What do we mean by it? Can there ever be a perfect painting? Can there be a perfect cake? Or a perfectly washed plate! Can there ever be a perfect meditation period? Who decides? Are we not talking about personal interpretation? What is perfect to one is not quite up to the mark for another. And everything becomes tight. 'This is how it should be. There's a place for everything and everything has its place.' And when I fail, as I must, the misery. 'I'm no good. I'm useless. Everyone is better than me. I can't stand myself.' And how can one possibly reach perfection in a changing world? In a relative world? Where is there an objective standard? And if there is one, who decided it was? Can't be that objective then! I was cured of a lot of my obsession for perfection in Sri Lanka. I'd just installed myself in a kuti (monastic hut). A gardener came to cut back the weeds and sweep out the leaves and so give me a head start. As he was leaving, I pointed out that he hadn't finished the job. There was still a strip of garden to be cleared. 'Tomorrow', he said. I never saw him again! I was annoyed. Why couldn't he finish the job properly! It was the same with the monks. They swept the leaves on the paths and open ground, but there it was. A little bit left. I was so miffed! Then I woke up! I saw what pressure I was putting on myself – and my meditation – to be perfect. Right, I thought, enough of that! Every morning I swept out my room, thoroughly. But now I decided to leave a corner unswept. How it clawed on the mind! A few days passed and I was ok with it. I even stopped being so judgemental about my meditation. What a relief! Now excellence is something else. It is relative. It is dependent on the person. When a child drew a picture of me without my nose, it was excellent. When an artist friend painted a portrait of me, it was excellent. It's the best I can do. It doesn't mean to say I can't do better. Nor that another couldn't have done better. It's just that now, this very moment, I'm doing what I'm doing the best I can. That's good enough, isn't it? So where's the anxiety coming from? It might be real. I might not be good enough. Maybe I will lose my job. But that's ok, if I'm doing my best. I've to accept I've over-reached myself. But I still feel anxious. And jealous of others? Am I still in competition? Still competitive? I've slipped into the error of elitism. Here I am comparing! I'm better than you. I'm worse than you. And at a more subtle level I'm equal to you. The 'you' in equal, of course, simply means I've found a companion in conceit. Someone I can join to compare ourselves against all those who are superior or inferior to us! When I win, I feel great! When I lose, I feel miserable! That's the three conceits the Buddha talks about. That's dukkha! That's grief. And worse. Elitism judges the person by how good they are at doing something, achieving something. Take reading. Some people are poor readers, some speed readers. Bertrand Russell, the philosopher, read an Agatha Christie novel in 15 min. Don't we tend to rate people according to their cleverness. To be clever is to be a good person. Hence, a slow reader can't be a very good person. So if a slow reader thinks they are no good till they can speed read, then they suffer from the effects of elitism. Best to stay within my limits. No pain!

What a joy it is just to do things the best I can. Now that's excellent!

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