

Dhp 152-153: The Inner Critic

Bhante Bodhidhamma · YouTube Talks · 24:58

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato samma-sambhodassa
Namo tassa bhagavato arahato samma-sambhodassa
Namo tassa bhagavato arahato samma-sambhodassa

Homage to the Buddha, the Blessed Noble and Fully Self-Awakened One.

So I've chosen these two *Dhammapada* verses, 152 and 153. I shall do my little chanting.

Sudassaṃ vajjaṃ aññesaṃ attano pana duddasaṃ
Paresaṃ hi so vajjāni opunāti yathā bhusaṃ
Attano pana chādeti kalim va kitavā saṭho

And the translation, I'll do the one and then we'll do the little story that comes with it. So the first one is, it's easy to see the fault of others, but hard to see one's own. One sifts out the faults of others like chaff, but conceals one's own as a cheat conceals a bad throw of the dice.

The commentary, a little story. In the town of Bhaddiya there lived a rich man called Mendaka. When the Buddha arrived at Bhaddiya, he realised that Mendaka and his whole family were able to understand the Dharma. He explained the teaching to them, and after hearing the Dharma from him, Mendaka, his wife, son, daughter-in-law and servant all attained first level of attainment. It was quick, wasn't it?

Mendaka related how many ascetic teachers spoke ill of the Buddha and tried to dissuade Mendaka from seeing him. The Buddha explained by this verse that it is only very natural to see others' faults and not to see one's own. The Buddha then revealed the past existences of Mendaka. He was always a rich man who donated many things to those seeking awakening. So that's a big hint. You have to take these things with a pinch of salt.

So that's really about finding fault with others, not seeing one's own faults. That's the problem. I think we all do that to some extent.

Now the next verse, much the same. If one focuses on others' faults and constantly takes offense, one's own toxins flourish and one is far from their destruction.

Now here, Gil Fronsdal has translated the word *asava* as toxins, but it's a particular word, it's a group of three, sometimes four, often translated as the taints or the cankers, and it includes sense desire as leading to attachment, the desire to become eternally, to be yourself eternally, to be a person eternally, and

ignorance or delusion. But sometimes you get wrong view added to it, which seems to me just an extension of ignorance. This ignorance *avijja* is often also talked about as *moha* which is delusion, and of course that will manifest in the way we think and how we understand things. So that was probably a later addition or a clarification.

So the commentary on that one is, there was a monk named Ujjhanasaññi. He was always finding faults with others. It's fairly easy to get angry and speak ill of people. When the Buddha found out, he spoke this verse. He also added that sometimes finding faults with others is good. When we see someone misbehave and we try to teach that person good ways, then it's worthy of praise. But if we do it out of spite or malice, then we won't be able to achieve concentration, and therefore we get further and further away from awakening.

Why would spite and malice stop us from achieving concentration? Well, the understanding is, of course, that it becomes a hindrance. It's always there in the back of our minds. It'll either replay itself, doing the same old thing in our fantasies, or we'll end up feeling guilty and horrible.

So this one is really about hypocrites, I suppose. And of course, what came to mind was the sayings of Jesus. So in Matthew 7, verse 5, he's very abrupt. He was said to have spoken directly, "Thou hypocrite, first cast out the beam out of thine own eye, and then shalt thou see clearly to cast out the mote out of thy brother's eye." So that's telling you. In Luke chapter 6:42, it's a bit more gentle. "And how art thou able to say to thy brother, Brother, permit, I may take out the speck in thine eye, thyself not beholding the log in thine own."

The Buddha too, he asked people not to criticise young monks so much because it would take away their confidence. It discourages you.

So just one or two questions to reflect upon. What is the effect on us when somebody criticises us? I think we feel a certain anger, a certain resentment. It's a bit infra dig and all that. So when we criticise somebody, it's always best to remind ourselves that their reaction is not going to be very pleasant unless somehow we can put it in a way that doesn't sound as though we are criticising them.

I remember once somebody, I was a friend and he said to me just out of the blue, he said, "You're jealous of me." Now actually it's not as though I don't suffer from jealousy, this is going back now before I was a monk, but I wasn't jealous of him. Anyway, we were standing there and another friend came up and started praising my new jacket, and when I turned this man was brimming with jealousy.

So often we criticise in others what we ourselves are not aware of. That's an old understanding, isn't it? But also I think sometimes we criticise others because we are caught up in our own understanding of how to behave. I'm just thinking of people coming late to meditation. So most people would get slightly angry with that, a bit miffed. Somebody's coming in constantly two, five minutes late. And of course that would be justified. They shouldn't do that. But then I think reflecting on the many times we've been late and

upset people, it just undermines that attitude.

I think also there are times when we criticise somebody because we have a particular standard. So for instance, talking about punctuality, if we tend to be very punctual, we tend to be critical of somebody who isn't. And somehow there's an overlay. I mean, you might be a little miffed that somebody's come late, but if you're over-angry, then that suggests a certain pride, a certain holding on to one's opinions. You've got to be a bit easy with people.

The Buddha talks about when you're going to say something to somebody that isn't going to be pleasant, you have to choose the right time. You don't want to choose it just when they're at the peak of happiness. And it has to be truthful and spoken gently, and of course known to be beneficial. So that's important. So if somebody comes late you might, I mean sometimes I do this to people who come late here, I might say to them, "Do you think you coming late upsets the other meditators?" Perhaps sometimes I appeal to them. "I'd be really pleased if you came early." So there are ways in which you can suggest, maybe without saying, the bell goes, you should be here on time. Anyway, I'm too small to act like that. I'll get beaten up.

Now, I did get slightly sidetracked here because I got into this inner critic, looking at the beam in our own eye, the log in our own eye. And it reminded me of Freud's superego and all that, where you've got this ethical component damning you and telling you how terrible you are. But I think we have to, presuming that we can distinguish between constructive self-criticism and what is destructive. Obviously, it's important for us to be able to have a clear view of our shortcomings. That's not a problem. But I think often our inner critic, as they say, is really a bit over the top sometimes. And as I say, it produces a sense of inadequacy, shame, defeat, low self-esteem, depression. We sometimes absorb our abuser's language.

I was thinking of a point where my father, I'd forgotten something, and my father said, "Forget means don't care." Now I, in those days you didn't answer back or you'd get a smack on the head, so I had to swallow that. "Forget means don't care."

Now, later on, of course, I began to realise, yeah, if you care for something, you tend not to forget it. I mean, you don't forget the plane time that you're going to take when you go on holiday. And you don't forget meeting a friend for a cup of tea or something. So it's really when we don't want to forget something, if we make it important to ourselves, then we don't. Now the only exception to that is when you get old like me and then you get what you call senior moments. It doesn't matter how much you remind yourself, you just forget.

Anyway, I came across this compilation by Jay Earley and Bonnie Weiss. One is a psychologist and Bonnie is a psychotherapist. And they've come up with these seven types of inner critics. I thought, well, that's interesting. I thought we'd just read through these and then afterwards we can all have a little discussion as to which one we're guilty of.

So the first one is the perfectionist. The critic tries to get you to do things perfectly. It sets high standards

for things you produce and has difficulty saying something is complete and letting it go out to represent your best work. Tries to make sure that you fit in and that you will not be judged or rejected. And its expectations probably reflect those of people who've been important to you in the past.

And that critic, when it comes, I think you have to recognise it. It's like you're doing *vipassana* and you record, you call it by its name. "Now that's perfectionism." And then you have to feel, you have to feel the negativity of it. And then you have to remind yourself, a person cannot be perfect. It's just a fact. You can't be perfect. But you can be excellent. You can do things as best as you can. And that's good enough.

So in a sense, these inner critics, you have to actually acknowledge them. You have to feel what they're doing to you in your heart. I mean, they're all aversive. And then when that passes you've got to find the opposite.

So here we have the inner controller. So this critic tries to control your impulses, eating, drinking, sexual activity and so on. It's polarised with an indulger, an addict who it fears can get out of control at any moment. It tends to be harsh and shaming in an effort to protect you from yourself. It is motivated to try and make you a good person, which is accepted and functions well in society.

Now, in a sense, of course, part of that's good. I mean, we don't want to be overcome by habits such as overeating and things like that. But on the other hand, there's an overlay of that, which can make life miserable for you. So this harsh and shaming, see? So again, I think it's a case of feeling it, naming it for what it is. "That's the controller." And then just to sit with it till that aversion disappears. And then to talk to yourself kindly. Yes, the Buddha's word is restraint, to exercise restraint.

Then we have the taskmaster. So the critic wants you to work hard and be successful. And it fears that you may be mediocre or lazy and will be judged as a failure if it does not push you to keep going. Its pushing often activates a procrastinator, a rebel that fights against its harsh dictate. So here we have a real contradictory mental state. And I think again it's the same thing, to actually feel that and hear what it's saying and to name it. And then one other thing we can do is to have a conversation with it. That you're not lazy, insist that you're not lazy by any means.

The next one is the underminer. So the critic tries to undermine your self-confidence and self-esteem so that you won't take risks. It makes direct attacks on your self-worth so that you will be able to stay small and not take chances where you could be hurt or rejected. It's afraid of your being too big, too visible, and not being able to tolerate judgment or failure.

So this seems to centre on self-confidence, self-esteem. Fear of failure, that really can be such a destroyer of life. You don't do anything just in case you fail. That can be quite destructive. One has to take the measured risk. And in so doing, even failure becomes a success because then you know it's a learning process. But if you're always going to be afraid of failing, then you just don't risk anything. You just stay dead safe and you undermine your potential.

So it's the same with the destroyer. So it makes pervasive attacks on your fundamental self-worth. It shames you and makes you feel inherently flawed and not entitled to basic understanding or respect. This most debilitating critic comes from early life deprivation or trauma and it is motivated by belief that it is safer not to exist. My goodness. So that's a, if there is that within us then that really has to be tackled. That's not a very good thing to have within us. But again, it is very much a case of naming it, not being afraid of it, turning towards it and really getting into the motivating moods, the motivating emotional states and to hold steady, to be with that and to know that it passes. And when it passes and we haven't indulged it, it's actually being weakened all the time. It's only a habit, that's what it is, just a habit. And then of course to turn around upon ourselves and say things that make us feel we are worthy.

The guilt tripper. Well that's a regular one, I think. This critic is stuck in the past. It's unable to forgive you for wrongs you've done or people you've hurt. It is concerned about relationship and holds you to standards of behaviour prescribed by your community, culture and family. Tries to protect you from repeating past mistakes by making sure you never forget or feel free. Oh yeah, guilt can be awful really, always feeling that we've done something terrible. It can almost be an amorphous feeling which hangs around. "You are guilty, you ought to be hanged." And that of course just messes your relationships up.

So again, much the same way, to feel the guilt, know it's delusive. Now here, of course, we have to be careful because there is proper guilt. I mean, if we do something wrong, which is plainly wrong, or if we know it's plainly wrong, then obviously we should feel guilty and shameful. When it works at that level, the Buddha calls them the two guardians of society. That's tough for us to accept. We have such a downer on guilt and shame. But when they actually activate to correct our behaviour, then they're doing their job. And once the behaviour is corrected, there shouldn't be any more guilt and shame. That's the way it ought to work. And then it stays in the background as a lesson. And so it stops you doing the same thing again, the same wrong things again, because you remember, "Oh, when I do that, this is how I feel." But if it continues and continues, then it's become an obsessive mental state.

And then finally the conformist. So the critic tries to get you to fit into a certain mode based on standards held by society, your culture or your family. It wants you to be liked and admired and to protect you from being abandoned, shamed or rejected. The conformist fears that the rebel or the free spirit in you would act in ways that are unacceptable. So it keeps you from being in touch with and expressing your true nature.

So again, yes, I'm reminded actually of a monk who joined the order, of a man who joined the order. And he was in the order for quite some time. And then he realised that he was just playing at being a monk. He was just, it was like a performance. And there was no real connection with the...

way of life. He was just dressing nicely, holding his bowl beautifully, saying the right things, always looking monkish and spiritual. When he woke up to that, he left. He'd been play-acting, although I dare say his original impulse, his original desire to become a monk had been real. But that really undermined

him.

So eventually, I think it's this whole thing about distinguishing between what is beneficial self-criticism. To be able to look at one's actions and recognize that they're not wholesome, they're not good, and then to make that determination not to behave like that. We can be a bit too sensitive, we can be a bit too lax with our behaviour. But we learn that just through doing what we think is correct and then learning from those mistakes.

They've written a book, by the way. It's called *Freedom from Your Inner Critic*, if you want to read more about what they say about things. I thought that was a nice breakdown of what we all suffer from. I think we all have a little bit of all of those, probably.

So as usual, I can only hope my little homily has been of some benefit, and that by your undermining this awful self-critic and yet knowing how to criticise oneself wisely, you may attain full liberation from suffering sooner rather than later.

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