

Non-Criticism and the Pursuit of Harmlessness

Firstly, I would like to point out that in talking about criticism, non-criticism, and the pursuit of harmlessness I am not an expert by a long stretch – who is? Who can in all honesty put hand on heart and say that they have never criticized another, or struggled to refrain from criticizing the family, the government, their work, and work colleagues, and above all the partner they have a close relationship with?

However, this brief presentation is simply a look at the power of non-criticism as a transformative step towards harmlessness, rather than criticism in totality, although that must necessarily be included and discussed.

In saying that non-criticism is a transformative step, it is because as soon as one ‘chooses’ to refrain from criticism, consciously and with all one's heart and soul, a significant and quantum leap in consciousness is taken. The decision challenges the habits of a lifetime and a society that has a deeply rooted psychology in criticism as a norm. It challenges the temptation of the individual to entertain that type of gossip which sends out hurt arrows that wound the poor target that is under attack – the poisoned arrows of hate, cruelty, lies and slander.

The Tibetan teacher refers to negative criticism as a “virulent poison” and that “it damages in every case eventually the one who criticises.” These arrows of poison made up of attack-thoughts have a boomerang effect, hitting the target first, only to return to attack the one who initially sent them.

On this idea of poison, there is a poem written by William Blake, published in 1794 as part of his ‘Songs of Experience’ collection. It describes the narrator's repressed feelings of anger towards an individual, emotions which eventually lead to murder, a symbolic murder or what might today be referred to as character assassination. The poem explores themes of indignation, revenge, and more generally the fallen state of humankind. It is a deceptively simple poem and yet has carried a message that is still applicable today.

The poem suggests that transmuting anger and criticism through what we call today ‘right speech’ reduces the need for vengeance, and this in turn neutralises repressed anger. The first stanza sets the tone “I was angry with my

friend; I told my wrath, my wrath did end. I was angry with my foe; I told it not my wrath did grow.

And I watered it in fears, night, and morning with my tears; And I sunned it with smiles, and with soft deceitful wiles.

And it grew both day and night, till it bore an apple bright. And my foe beheld it shine, and he knew that it was mine.

And into the garden stole, when the night had veiled the pole; In the morning glad I see. My foe outstretched beneath the tree.”

It is plain to see from this that negative criticism blinds a person to reason as much as anger does and can create a similar scenario of deceit and destructiveness. It is also interesting that the actual tree, has been described as a tree of “Mystery” and appears again in Blake’s “The Human Abstract,” and both trees are grown within the mind as stated “The gods of the earth and sea sought through nature to find this Tree. But their search was all in vain. There grows one in the human brain.

This brings us on to the part that the mind plays, for the mind is both the instigator of negative criticism and at the same time holds the solution to cutting out the insidious root of the problem. The solution lies in the technique we call ‘detachment,’ which is a mental state and which we are urged to practice and apply to all our relationships and affairs of everyday living.

As a spiritual practice handed down from the Buddhist tradition it recognises that from true detachment comes harmlessness. The latter as we know is also a vital practice and together, they form two branches of the same tree.

Both detachment and harmlessness are two of the hardest aspects of spirituality to practice. Perhaps it is because the philosophy, and the central truth behind both practices transcends theory and makes a hypocrite of the one who pays lip service to the teaching but does not apply it in practice. In short it calls out the glamour, delusion, and attachments embedded in the ‘not self,’ and we all know this is not a pretty sight when the not so spiritual ‘stuff’ hits the fan!

The practice of detachment involves cultivating the attitude of being an Onlooker, the Observer, or the Silent Watcher. Mentally, noticing the thoughts being generated, their quality, intention, and above all motive, so that a space in which conscious choices can be made as opposed to identification with and

obedience to every mental whim which makes the individual a prisoner. Likewise, the emotional aspect is dealt with in this way also, observing one's reactions instead of reacting to external stimuli no matter how impactful. To develop an impersonal attitude does not imply a lack of feeling, just as the type of detachment we are speaking of here is not a form of dissociation from the human predicament – In fact, these practices make us more sensitive to the needs of others, more empathic, more able to demonstrate active compassion because the lower mind is silenced, and in that silence the sense of urgency of the work is heard and responded to. The voice in the head and its incessant chatter plus the downward pull of the emotional vehicle when selfishly focussed prevent the intuition as 'the organ of perception of the soul' from fully operating and taking charge of its instrument as it should.

The term "Right Speech" is speech that is governed by self-control and is especially significant to the practice of harmlessness and requires the same conditions of silence that allow for the voice of the soul to be heard. That is to say we are all learning the art of when to speak and when to remain silent. We are all learning that speech can be a vehicle for helping or hindering others, for hurting or healing, for hatred or love, negative criticism, or positive communication etc.....

Finally, more words of wisdom from the Tibetan teacher who says, "Let the "Spirit of Goodwill" dominate our minds and there will be no room for the spirit of criticism and the spreading of destructive discussion."

Thank you!

