

# Right Speech and Criticism

## The Double-Edged Sword



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Essays on Buddhist Doctrines

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Recently a friend asked me whether the Buddha had anything to say about criticism, speech pointing out the negative or the defective in things or persons. When I told him he was rather surprised, saying that he thought criticism would be a type of wrong speech, the opposite of Right Speech (*Samma Vaca*), the third step on the Buddha's Noble Eightfold Path. The Buddha had more to say about how we speak than almost any other behaviour of ethical significance. He was fully aware of the impact verbal communication can have for both good and ill. In the Anguttara Nikaya he encapsulated his vision of the ideal speech when he said: "If speech has five marks it is well-spoken, not ill-spoken, not blameworthy or condemned by the wise. It is spoken at the right time, it is spoken in truth, it is spoken gently, it is spoken about goal and it is spoken with love." This embodies the Buddha's high ethical standards but also a concern for social harmony and peace. Critical speech might be included here but it is not specifically mentioned. For that we have to go to the Abhayarajakumara Sutta in which someone asked the Buddha if he could ever say anything that would upset

others and he affirmed that he could. He said that his words were always characterized by four things - they were truthful; useful; spoken at the right time; and motivated by compassion. This can stand as a good definition of Right Speech. Skilful and spiritually mature speech is always honest, straightforward, free from dissembling and euphemisms. It is also useful in that it is relevant to the issue at hand and includes a minimum of idle chatter. Such speech is also timely. Some comments at one time could be completely inappropriate and yet just what is needed at another. Concerning criticism, some of the right times to criticise someone might be in private; to their face rather than behind their back; to balance the chastisement with praise where possible; and when there is a likelihood of bringing about some change in the person's behaviour. And perhaps it is also good not to be criticising all the time. Constantly carping and condemning someone can be as negative as the fault inviting the criticism. And finally, Right Speech is always motivated by compassion. Even when it includes criticism, the motive of speaking hard truths should be not to hurt, embarrass or to appear superior to the person being criticized but by the genuine desire to help improve persons or situations.

This interesting dialogue on criticism is to be found in the Anguttara Nikaya. "Potaliya came to visit the Lord, greeted him courteously, sat down at one side and as he did the Lord said to him, 'Potaliya, there are these four persons found in the world. The first criticizes that which deserves criticism,

at the right time, saying what is factual and true, but he does not praise that which deserves praise. The second speaks in praise of the praiseworthy, at the right time, saying what is factual and true, but does not criticize that which deserves criticism. The third type of person neither criticizes that which deserves criticism nor praises the praiseworthy. And lastly, the fourth type criticizes that which deserves criticism and praises the praiseworthy, at the right time, saying what is factual and true. Now of these four persons, which do you think is the most admirable and rare?' Potaliya replied: 'In my opinion good Gotama, the one who neither criticizes that which deserves criticism nor praises the praiseworthy is the most admirable and rare, because his indifference is admirable.' But the Lord replied, 'Well, I maintain that he who criticizes that which deserves criticism and praises the praiseworthy, at the right time, saying what is factual and true, he is the best. And why? Because his timing is admirable.'" Here as elsewhere the Buddha emphasised the positive role of timing when offering criticism.

It seems the Buddha was fully aware of the dual character of criticism, that it is a double-edged sword, that it can be motivated by good or evil intentions and lead to either constructive or destructive ends. Here is another interesting dialogue from the Tipitaka on this issue. "The Brahman Vassakara, an important man in Magadha, came to the Lord and said, 'Good Gotama, for my part I say this, this is my opinion. If anyone speaks of what he has seen, heard or sensed, there is no harm in him saying that, no harm

can come from that.' The Lord then replied, 'As for me, I do not say that everything one has seen, heard or sensed should be spoken of, and nor I do not say it should not be spoken of. If one speaks and negative states grow, then one should not speak. If one speaks and positive states grow, then one should speak of what one has seen, heard, sensed and understood'." Very clearly here the Buddha is referring to constructive criticism, hard truths that are likely to stimulate reform, change and positive growth. The *Milindapanha* puts it like this, 'Hot water softens anything that can be softened and makes it pliable. So too, the words of the Buddha even when harsh are for good purpose and are imbued with compassion.'

In some circles in Sri Lanka today criticism of Buddhism and the Sangha has become common, at times even fierce. This is not necessarily a bad thing. Buddhism in Sri Lanka has its problems as does any human institution and there is plenty of room for renewal and revitalization. Criticism can help highlight problems so that reforms can be enacted. It can help distinguish right from wrong, good and bad. Sri Lankan Buddhism has been infiltrated by many popular practices and superstitions and pointing out the folly of these can help clarify the real Dhamma. Likewise, the Sri Lankan Sangha often appears to lack clear leadership and purpose so that some monks channel their energy into rather un-monkly pursuits, the most ignoble of these being politics, astrology, and careers in the secular world. But once these and other problems have been highlighted. to keep harping on about them just gets everyone down and poisons the atmosphere. The

positive next step is to do something, or at least recommend something constructive be done about the problems and provide a vision for a better future. Whether this can or will be done remains to be seen. Sri Lankan Buddhism has been in the doldrums before only to be reformed and renewed. I think of that inspiring 17<sup>th</sup> century monk Saranankara Sangharaja.

Recently someone sent me a link to a sermon on YouTube by a popular preaching monk. I watched the whole video and was quite impressed by the speaker's obvious mastery of the suttas and his fresh perspective on them. His sermon also included criticisms of some of the traditional interpretations of the Dhamma and the behaviour of conventional monks, but most of these criticisms seemed to me to be quite justified. This stimulated me to watch nearly half a dozen other sermons by this same speaker but as I did they left me with a less favourable impression. Every talk included criticism of traditional understanding of Dhamma and of monks to the degree that it was clearly a major theme of the speaker and one he returned to again and again. It almost seemed to be an obsession with him to put others down. And the tone of his voice and the expression on his face while delivering these reproaches suggested that there was a lot of annoyance and even anger behind them. Criticism can tell you as much about the thing being criticised and it does about the one giving the criticism. I also noted that in several sermons the speaker went as far as to say that he and only he, really

understood the Dhamma properly – quite a claim. Presumably he has interviewed every Buddhist on Earth and discussed the Dhamma with them in depth in order to come to this conclusion.

As the Buddha said, criticism has to be given at the right time and surely one of the wrong times to criticise is all the time, as this speaker did. If someone is constantly condemning, fault-finding and casting aspersions on others we are justified in being suspicious of their motives, especially if at the same time they are insisting how much better than others they are. Likewise, if the criticism lacks tact, a sense of proportion and is couched in an angry, mocking or sarcastic tone we are right to consider that it does not grow out of compassion and kindness. And of course someone who has reached the spiritual heights would resist speaking in such a way.

Listening to the last sermon of this speaker, taking note of yet more of his condemnations, I was reminded of the sutta in the Anguttara Nikaya where the Buddha said, ‘The good person does not speak of what is to the discredit of another, even when asked. What then when unasked? If, however, on being questioned, he is required to speak, then with reserve, caution and in brief he criticises the other person. This is the meaning of the words “This person is good”.’

Let us be aware of our problems, whether social, political or religious, let us speak of them honestly and fully; let us criticise when necessary but in a measured and constructive manner, let us minimise blame and maximise

giving thought to how things can be changed for the better. This at least, is what the Buddha counselled.