



You Have Just Been Criticized. What Next?

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Imagine that you are working with someone on a project and they say to you, “You are doing a great job, but.” You interpret the first part of the sentence as praise and now are awaiting what comes after the “but.”

In this scenario, there is the anticipation of criticism. Whereas praise is easily accepted, what is perceived as criticism is usually not.

Criticism is one of what the Buddha called the Eight Worldly Winds. In *The Failings of the World Lokavipatti Sutta*¹ he said: *“Monks, these eight worldly conditions spin after the world, and the world spins after these eight worldly conditions. Which eight? Gain, loss, status, disgrace, censure [criticism], praise, pleasure, & pain. These are the eight worldly conditions that spin after the world, and the world spins after these eight worldly conditions.”*

These worldly conditions are a part of everyday life. However, we crave the positives (gain, status, praise, and pleasure) but have aversion to the negative ones (loss, disgrace, criticism and pain). In this talk, we will explore praise and criticism. How does one who has not been exposed to the teachings (uninstructed) deal with praise and criticism?

Further in the *Lokavipatti Sutta*, the Buddha tells what happens when one who is exposed to praise and criticism: *The Blessed One said, “Praise arises for an uninstructed run-of-the-mill person. He does not reflect, ‘Praise has arisen for me. It is inconstant, stressful, & subject to change.’ He does not discern it as it has come to be. Criticism arises for an uninstructed run-of-the-mill person. He does not reflect, ‘Criticism has arisen for me. It is inconstant, stressful, & subject to change.’ He does not discern it as it has come to be.”*

“His mind remains consumed with the praise. His mind remains consumed with the criticism”

“He welcomes the arisen praise and rebels against the arisen criticism. As he is thus engaged in welcoming & rebelling, he is not released from birth, aging, or death; from sorrows, lamentations, pains, distresses, or despairs. He is not released, I tell you, from suffering & stress.”

The Buddha then describes what happens when one who knows the teachings and is exposed to praise and criticism: *“Now, praise arises for a well-instructed disciple of the noble ones. He reflects, ‘Praise has arisen for me. It is inconstant, stressful, & subject to change.’ He discerns it as it actually is.”*

“Criticism arises. He reflects, ‘Criticism has arisen for me. It is inconstant, stressful, & subject to change.’ He discerns it as it actually is.

“His mind does not remain consumed with the praise. His mind does not remain consumed with the criticism.

“He does not welcome the arisen praise, or rebel against the arisen criticism. As he thus abandons welcoming & rebelling, he is released from birth, aging, & death; from sorrows, lamentations, pains, distresses, & despairs. He is released, I tell you, from suffering & stress.

“This is the difference, this the distinction, this the distinguishing factor between the well-instructed disciple of the noble ones and the uninstructed run-of-the-mill person.”

What the Buddha has noted is that we need to treat praise and criticism the same – see them for what they are (inconstant, stressful, & subject to change (impermanent)) and abandon getting consumed by them.

When you are criticized, how are you addressed?

Reflect on the manner in which someone has criticized you. The Buddha shares his observations: In the Kakacūpama Sutta², the Buddha addressed his monks: *“Monks, there are these five aspects of speech by which others may address you: timely or untimely, true or false, affectionate or harsh, beneficial or unbeneficial, with a mind of goodwill or with inner hate. Others may address you in a timely way or an untimely way. They may address you with what is true or what is false. They may address you in an affectionate way or a harsh way. They may address you in a beneficial way or an unbeneficial way. They may address you with a mind of goodwill or with inner hate.”*

When someone is criticizing you, their speech may have one or more of these unskillful features: untimely, false, harsh, unbeneficial and with inner hate. **This makes it all the harder to deal with criticism.** As the Buddha noted, you can see that the interaction can easily deteriorate if any one or more of these factors are negative.

What can you do if the other person is speaking with some of these factors being present?

The Buddha said: *“In any event, you should train yourselves: ‘Our minds will be unaffected, and we will say no evil words. We will remain sympathetic to that person’s welfare, with a mind of goodwill, and with no inner hate. We will keep pervading him with an awareness imbued with goodwill and, beginning with him, we will keep pervading the all-encompassing world with an awareness imbued with goodwill—abundant, enlarged, immeasurable, free from hostility, free from ill will.’ That’s how you should train yourselves.*

What is the Role of Mindfulness in responding?

The Buddha addressed this role when he counseled his son, Rahula as noted in the Ambalaṭṭhikā Rāhulovāda Sutta:

“Whenever you want to do a verbal action, you should reflect on it: ‘This verbal action I want to do—would it lead to self-affliction, to the affliction of others, or to both? Would it be an unskillful verbal action, with painful consequences, painful results?’ If, on reflection, you know that it would lead to self-affliction, to the affliction of others, or to both; it would be an unskillful verbal action with painful consequences, painful results, then any verbal action of that sort is absolutely unfit for you to do. But if on reflection you know that it would not cause affliction... it would be a skillful verbal action with pleasant consequences, pleasant results, then any verbal action of that sort is fit for you to do.

“While you are doing a verbal action, you should reflect on it: ‘This verbal action I am doing—is it leading to self-affliction, to the affliction of others, or to both? Is it an unskillful verbal action, with painful consequences, painful results?’ If, on reflection, you know that it is leading to self-affliction, to affliction of others, or both... you should give it up. But if on reflection you know that it is not... you may continue with it.

“Having done a verbal action, you should reflect on it: ‘This verbal action I have done—did it lead to self-affliction, to the affliction of others, or to both? Was it an unskillful verbal action, with painful consequences, painful results?’ If, on reflection, you know that it led to self-affliction, to the affliction of others, or to both; it was an unskillful verbal action with painful consequences, painful results, then you should confess it, reveal it, lay it open to the Teacher or to an observant companion in the holy life. Having confessed it... you should exercise restraint in the future. But if on reflection you know that it did not lead to affliction... it was a skillful verbal action with pleasant consequences, pleasant results, then you should stay mentally refreshed & joyful, training day & night in skillful qualities.

“Thus, Rāhula, you should train yourself: ‘I will purify my bodily actions through repeated reflection. I will purify my verbal actions through repeated reflection. I will purify my mental actions through repeated reflection.’ That’s how you should train yourself.”³

In other words, you should be mindful before, during and after you speak. Reflecting before speaking gives you the choice of not speaking. During speaking, being mindful allows you to keep your resolve. Reflecting afterwards either confirms that you spoke skillfully or that you may need to take further action.

In summary, when we hear criticism, follow these steps:

- Be mindful. **Pause** before responding

A quote from The Unspoken: *I took a moment and let silence fill the room. This made whatever I said next seem as if it came from serious thinking. I had learned this trick from my psychiatrist father. He liked to call it the “pause of deep intellect.”⁴*

This is the most important step.

- Be aware of the feeling in your body? If it is unpleasant is it because the criticism was untimely, false, harsh, unbeneficial, spoken with ill-will?

- Note to yourself:
 - In any event, my mind will be unaffected, and I will say no evil words. I will remain sympathetic to that person’s welfare, with a mind of goodwill, and with no inner hate. I will keep pervading him with an awareness imbued with goodwill and, beginning with him, I will keep pervading the all-encompassing world with an awareness imbued with goodwill—abundant, enlarged, immeasurable, free from hostility, free from ill will.’ That is what I will do.
- Be mindful while you respond
- Reflect on the response that you have given.

In the Well Spoken sutta, Ven. Vaṅgīsa praised the Blessed One to his face with these fitting verses:

*“Speak only the speech
that neither torments self
nor does harm to others.
That speech is truly well-spoken.
Speak only endearing speech,
speech that is welcomed.
Speech when it brings no evil
to others
is pleasant.
Truth, indeed, is deathless speech:
This is a primeval principle.
The goal and the Dhamma
—so say the calm—
are firmly established on truth.
The speech the Awakened One speaks,
for attaining unbinding,
rest,
for making an end
to the mass of stress:
That is the speech unsurpassed.”⁵*

In closing, as Emily Hoffman advises in *How to Avoid Getting Angry*, “Never let a problem to be solved be more important than a person to be loved.”⁶

¹ The Failings of the World [Lokavipatti Sutta](#) (AN 8:6)

² The Simile of the Saw [Kakacūpama Sutta](#) (MN 21)

³ The Exhortation to Rāhula at Mango Stone [Ambalatthikā Rāhulovāda Sutta](#) (MN 61)

⁴ Smith, Ian K.. *The Unspoken: An Ashe Cayne Novel* (p. 4). Kindle Edition

⁵ [3:3 Well-spoken](#)

⁶ Emily Hoffman, [How to Avoid Getting Angry](#)