

CRITICAL OF WHOM?

March 26, 2013

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One thing I have noticed in my years of being around the Tibetans (monks and rinpoches) and Tibetan Buddhism in general is how they approach criticism, and here I mean personal criticism.

I used to think their attitude toward personal comments might be just that old cliché, you know, oriental inscrutability and reservation when it comes to being personal, but I finally had to give that thought up. It does not seem to be the case. Their attitude seems to reflect Buddhist philosophy about the self, at least among the high rinpoches that I have met.

My guess is that in their view, addressing the "self" is just talking at the symptoms, without reaching the core. In other words, true to their philosophy, just as Buddhists don't consider the personal self as having permanent existence, they don't bother to address their criticism to it either. To make a joke, the self to them is a non-entity. Their view is much deeper and I believe better than that, and I have to take a lesson from them and reorganize my own thinking on this topic.

After all, I am not only a professional music critic (or was), but I am very, very critical in general, and certainly not above sharing my criticism with those I am critical of, and personally too. I have been told this is not one of my most endearing qualities, and my tendency to be very direct and to not beat around the bush only makes me harder to take... for some.

The Buddhists don't take the self as seriously as we here in the West do. Not only that, they believe that each one of us has Buddha nature, and is at heart a living Buddha that has not yet recognized his or her own nature. They not only believe this, but act on their belief by addressing not the personality (what we call the "Self"), but the Buddha (and the Buddha nature) within. I am finally getting my mind around this approach. It is superior to what I have been doing or trying to do.

So the Rinpoches seem to skip over trying to criticize or address the personality, but speak only to the Buddha within. Instead of laying down the law and reprimanding another person, they tend to speak respectfully to the Buddha within us and do their best to point out things that might be helpful. What a great idea.

I always wondered how Khenpo Rinpoche (the lama I work with) could be so kind to others. It used to really bother me that he would take as much time with just any old person, even if they were rude, as he would with me. After all, I was (at least in my own mind) devoted and respectful, and many "outsiders" were just plain rude.

I remember one particular time when Rinpoche was speaking at the local university here and there were, of course, many students present. Some of them had not come to hear the dharma, but just on a lark to see (I guess) what Tibetans are like. Worse, they would ask Rinpoche rude questions, questions they would never ask their own parents or their parent's friends, questions like: "How is your sex life?"

This really irritated me, the sheer disrespect to someone I respected so much. Yet Rinpoche never batted an eye, and would patiently and carefully and lovingly answer each question, like

the above question about his sex life, with "Me...a fat old man?" Things like that.

I guess my point is that Rinpoche (and perhaps Tibetans in general, or at least rinpoches) are looking beyond the person to the Buddha nature within and always addressing that. And the inner Buddha in each of us is deserving of great respect. I mean, what a future we have, eventually. I can at last understand their approach. Perhaps that is why instead of offering personal criticism (as I tend to do), they only point out things that might be helpful, and always with a gentle tone. They know to whom they are speaking.

And now that I think of it, my very first dharma teacher, many years ago, would repeatedly say to me.

"Five things observe with care, to whom you speak, of what, why, when, and where."

This makes a lot of sense to me.

