**Feedback in the Context of Dharma Practice**

A talk by Matthew Brensilver, Spirit Rock Meditation Center, 1/26/2015

Some years ago, one of my main teachers, Shinzen Young, made what seemed like kind of an off-handed comment, and I hadn’t heard from him, and I don’t believe I’ve heard since. He said, “There are two maxims, two guiding principles of spiritual practice,…” He said, “*The first is—don’t fight with yourself at any level…Don’t fight with yourself at any level.”* And the second was, *“Take feedback.”*

It was a very striking summarization of the spiritual path: Don’t fight with yourself at any level, and take feedback.

So tonight, I wanted to reflect on feedback: on taking feedback, giving feedback, in the context of a dharma practice, in the context of this path of moving towards wisdom, compassion. And in a certain sense—you know I’m talking about feedback as I think Shinzen was talking about feedback—in the narrow sense of like, somebody comes up to me at the end of a talk and says, “Can you speak louder?” You know, very narrow kind of feedback. But in a certain sense our whole path is about taking feedback. Our whole path, the whole of the dharma path is about living with our eyes open and learning, right? And so maybe you’ve heard of a title of a collection of talks by Ajahn Chah: “Everything is Teaching Us.” Everything is teaching us. The dharma is everywhere and everything is teaching us. And so, from this perspective, everything we’re doing on this path is about actually taking feedback.

Now part of what I appreciated about this emphasis on taking feedback is that it helps break the spell of omniscience, the sense that we just might know everything. So this is a quote from a book by Catherine Shultz, “*Being Wrong: Adventures in the Margin of Error*.” And it’s—well, you’ll see how this is connected.

“Why is it so fun to be right? As pleasures go, it is, after all, a second order one, at best. Unlike many of life’s other delights: chocolate, surfing, kissing, it does not enjoy any mainline access to our biochemistry. And yet the thrill of being right is undeniable, universal, and almost entirely undiscriminating. We can’t enjoy kissing just anyone, but we can relish being right about almost anything. Our indiscriminate enjoyment of being right is matched by an almost equally indiscriminate feeling that we *are* right. Most of us go through life assuming that we are basically right, basically all the time, about basically everything. AS absurd as it sounds when we stop to think about it, our steady state seems to be one of unconsciously assuming that we are very close to omniscient, all knowing. If we relish being right and regard it as our natural state, you can guess how we feel about being wrong. For one thing, we tend to view it as rare and bizarre. For another, it leaves us feeling ashamed. Of all the things we are wrong about, this idea of error might well top the list. We are wrong about what it means to be wrong. Far from being a sign of intellectual inferiority, the capacity to err is crucial to human cognition. Far from being a moral flaw, it is inextricable from some of our most humane and honorable qualities. And far from being a mark of indifference or intolerance, wrongness is a vital part of how we learn and change. Thanks to error, we can revise our understanding of ourselves and amend our ideas about the world. However disorienting, difficult or humbling our mistakes might be, it is ultimately our wrongness, not rightness, that can teach us who we are.”

There is a very powerful suggestion there. And in so far as violence depends on certainty, this kind of opening to our non-omniscience can lead us towards a path of non-harming. The Buddha said we had to wake up from greed, hatred, and delusion. And we very likely know the fires of greed and hatred. We’re sitting here trying to mind our own business and the thought arises, “Cookies. There are cookies in the back.” We may need to rethink that actually—cookies in the back of the meditation hall. Anyway, there are cookies in the back and all of a sudden, our salvation depends on the break and having three dollars, and this we can actually very clearly know as the fiery intensity of longing. And even though the cookie itself might be very pleasurable, the longing, the greed for it, is definitely not pleasurable

*Voice from the back: “And not having the three dollars.” (laughter)*

It’s on me, Willy!

So we know greed. And hatred, aversion, resentment—this also announces itself very prominently in our minds. We know when we don’t like something, someone. And as we were talking about it during the Q&A, we can actually bring a view, an intentionality to aversion, to recognize that hatred can never end well. It can never end well. And we see that enough, we see the suffering, the dukkha, enough, when hatred arises we know it as a cause of separation and suffering.

But delusion? How do we recognize that?

In a certain sense, we only can see delusion, our confused notions of ourselves or happiness, when we bump into things, when we bump into problems in relationships, when we bump into suffering. This is actually an opportunity to learn, to see delusion. But it’s tricky because it’s often talked about as the water that we swim in. Like that quote from Schuntz: We are swimming in our view. And it can be quite tricky to actually see the cracks. But feedback, welcoming feedback is a very powerful way of seeing delusion. Because in feedback, especially in critical feedback, what it does, is it provides some insight into the architecture of *self-view*, meaning the ideas, the notions from which we build our sense of self. And the sense of self, from the Buddha’s perspective, is cobbled together with very strong glue—never the less—cobbled together. It is born of delusion and the freedom of our heart depends on seeing through. Feedback is a kind of opportunity to see through.

So I’m not a physician, so bear with me with this analogy. There are some forms of heart disease that can’t be detected when the heart is at rest. So, if you look at the patterns of blood flow or electrical activity of the heart when the heart is at rest, when the person is just sitting, there will be no evidence of disease. And what needs to be done in order to diagnose certain forms of heart disease, is the doctor will do a cardiac stress test, where maybe the person might, for example, walk or run on the treadmill and elevate the heart rate, and it’s only in the context of that elevated heart rate that you can begin to see the health or disease of the heart. And in the same way, we swim in self-view. And we need to almost stimulate self-view to see how and why we cling to a particular sense of who we are. And so just like the cardiac stress test stimulates the heart, the mechanisms of feedback, of opening to feedback is a way of stimulating self-view so it can be known more clearly.

Interestingly, we can actually welcome feedback, whether it’s spot on or off base. Normally we think, “*Ok, I’ll accept, I’ll welcome the feedback that’s spot on, and that which is off base, I’ll just brush aside*.” And we, of course, are encouraged to do that—to leave feedback that’s not relevant, that’s off base, aside. But in the initial moment we can actually practice trying it on, with an interest in seeing how we cling to a particular view of self. And from that perspective it doesn’t matter whether the feedback is right or wrong. We can actually try it on as a way of seeing where we’re hooked.

The extent to which any self-definition has a kind of sting to it, to that extent, my behavior will be distorted. So to make it concrete: The extent to which I am insisting, in this moment, on being a good teacher, to that extent, that becomes a priority, and my agenda then becomes self-aggrandizement or protecting my self-view, or being special. And what necessarily takes a back seat is the intention to be of value, to say something that’s useful… to be a cause of suffering. But the extent to which— “Oh, I’m not a good teacher,”—to the extent to which that stings, to that extent, my behavior will be distorted. And so, the dharma path is one that is about draining the emotional charge from self-definition. I am this, I’m not that. We come into the practice and these things are super charged. There are some self-views that we don’t even look at for many years or decades even, because they are so cherished: “I am THIS.” “I’m not THAT.”

But we’re living with a burden because the sting of those self-definitions—because we have to become territorial and defend ourselves—life feels more precarious. Sometimes I think about my aspiration for practice is to become unoffendable. And that doesn’t mean to condone harm or let other people tell me who I am or whatever. It means that we work through the kind of soft-spots in the heart-mind, deeply enough, so that there’s no more clinging to *I am this.* And that’s a very free way of being in the world. And we can use these kinds of, these opportunities of feedback as a way of exploring our edge with that. Because when we get critical feedback, as I’ll talk about more in a few minutes, as we get that, defensiveness almost automatically arises, right? Whether the feedback is spot on or off base, there’s a very strong push-back. But before we even get into that, it’s also important to acknowledge that sometimes positive feedback can be just as intense, just as difficult to take in. So normally we—it makes sense—like, ok, the critical feedback, I’m going to defend against that, but the positive feedback, yeah, I’ll welcome that. One meditator was saying, we were talking about this topic, and she said that the intensity of the feedback is almost perfectly matched by the intensity of the self-critical voice that rushes in, right? And there’s a kind of—yeah, my experience is there’s a real vulnerability taking in positive feedback. And that kind of intimacy that needs to be tolerated. And so, I know, I’ve tried to be more mindful of this, but you know, I think for years, probably people might say to me, “Wow that was a great talk,” and I’d be like, “I’m stupid…. glad it was good.” I’m dramatizing it, a bit—not that much—but a little bit. But it was an attempt to just drain the charge out of that moment, it was an inability to tolerate that. And maybe, in part because in taking in positive feedback it kind of, for me, stimulates a sort of childlike narcissism, like a young child being praised or something, and there’s a kind of—that feels like a very exposed, vulnerable way of being, for one’s own narcissism to be visible. Because normally we just try to look cool. But if people see the effort and enjoyment in looking cool, that’s a super vulnerable thing! Right?

So, I gave this talk to another group, and somebody came up to me, I was sharing about this point exactly, the sense of the compliment stimulating one’s narcissism, and he came up and he was like, “Shame on you, it’s not narcissism…” and he brought up that quote from Maryanne Williamson, about we’re less afraid of our brokenness than we are of our gifts and greatness.

Now in the process of opening to feedback we need to tolerate disorientation. Sometimes that can be a quick experience, but what happens when the ego gets challenged, it’s like the rug gets pulled out from underneath our feet. Because ego is the reference point for our life, and for the most part, we continually iterate, we repeat, again and again, “I am this; I am this…” “I’m not that…” And our days, in a certain sense, are spent repeating those phrases in subtle ways. So, when we are actually challenged, like, “Oh, I thought I was a competent teacher,” but I get some critical feedback, it’s like the ground starts to shake. And our capacity, our tolerance for disorientation is low. It’s very low. And so we try to get our bearings back, we try to re-establish the ground. And one of the ways we re-establish the ground is to say, “No, no, no, you are wrong.” The defensiveness arises. And that’s natural that it does that. But part of our practice is learning to tolerate disorientation. And this is a theme in much of our dharma practice—learning to feel safe even though we don’t have the familiar reference points, to feel safe even in the free flow of groundlessness.

And when we’re swimming in that disorientation in the process of receiving feedback, we can just practice: *No ground. Don’t know who I am. Don’t know if this is going to hurt me.*

Somebody… Non-violent communication. I know very little about non-violent communication, but I heard a trainer, Newt Bailey, who summarized a few points, very concrete recommendations around this feedback process, in giving feedback specifically. His suggestion was to be ready for defensiveness, to acknowledge the receiver’s efforts and concerns, to use questions and listening, to seek a better understanding on the receiver’s feelings, and to invite feedback on how you can support the person receiving the feedback. And that is a whole—we could unpack that over an extended period—and there is a fair amount of synergy between mindfulness and non-violent communication, that may be relevant for you.

Now in this dynamic, in the openness of the feedback situation, the vulnerability of it, we need another thing which is to be comfortable being porous and dependent, intimate, in a way. And I’ve noticed that the amount of intimacy—we think of intimacy as good, but we have to tolerate it. Sometimes it can feel intimate saying, “I’m angry with you,” than it feels to say, “I love you.” But the consequence of not sharing openly with each other is, the cost is one of intimacy. That’s the cost. And I’ve been amazed—when I do get the courage up to share something, say, “Hey—that…,“ and not in an aggressive way, but just in a clear way, “I’m angry with you,” and that’s received--it doesn’t have to be perfectly, but even reasonably well—the kind of intimacy that emerges out of that sense of closeness is quite striking. And so our passivity on these fronts ultimately compromises our sense of closeness with others.

Now all of this depends on having some context of care, support, kindness, because to play at this razor’s edge of disorientation, vulnerability, defensiveness, intimacy—there needs to be some level of confidence that it’s safe. And unfortunately, that’s not always there. But part of why we try to nourish all the goodness that exists in the relationships, it’s like money in the bank for when we do need to have difficult conversations, right? And something I notice actually in the dharma world is that people might know me over a period over months or years, and they know that I don’t want to harm them, and that actually gives me license to say, sometimes, things that are jarring or difficult, with the interest of serving their practice. But there’s a context of care and warmth, so that the communication can be really open.

Now we do this work for ourselves and our relationships, but we also do it for the safety of our communities and specifically, dharma communities. When we look at the heart-breaking chapters of harm that’s occurred in spiritual communities, what we see unifying all of those episodes, is a kind of breakdown, a broken mechanism of feedback, where the information is not flowing to and from the teachers, to and from the administrative staff, not flowing within the sangha. And so actually developing a culture of feedback is part of what helps insure the sanity, and stability and safety of dharma communities. So, we’re doing this for the welfare of the sangha, too.

*(longer pause)*

It’s sweet to be with you… Let’s just sit for a moment…

May our efforts here to together be a cause for more joy, more peace, more kindness. May whatever goodness is here in the room, may it resonate, reverberate with your own goodness, and spill out from our own hearts into our lives.