



## Silencing the Inner Critic *The nagging, negative voice of self-judgment,* says CHRISTINA FELDMAN, *is a powerful affliction best met with courage, kindness, and understanding.*

*Unruly beings are like space,  
There's not enough time to overcome them.  
Overcoming these angry thoughts  
Is like defeating all of our enemies.*  
— Shāntideva

THE BUDDHA SAT BENEATH the Bodhi tree on the eve of his enlightenment and was assailed by Mara, representing all of the afflictions we meet in the landscape of our minds: worry and restlessness, dullness and resistance, craving, aversion, and doubt. The one affliction that did not make an appearance in this story is the powerful voice of the inner critic—the inner judge that can torment us on a daily basis, undermining our well-being and distorting our relationship with life. The inner critic is the voice of shame, blame, belittlement, aversion, and contempt. To many of us, it is so familiar that it seems almost hardwired into our hearts.

Before exploring the nature of the judgmental mind, it is essential to mark the distinction between the voice of the inner critic and our capacity for discernment and discriminating wisdom.

Discriminating wisdom is what brings us to our cushion to meditate and inspires us to act in ways that bring suffering and harm to an end. Discriminating wisdom is the source of every wise act and word. Discernment draws upon ethics, compassion, and wisdom and teaches us moment by moment to discover the Buddha in ourselves and in others.

The inner critic is a creature of a different nature. With the inner critic, we may still come to our cushion but we come accompanied by a story that tells us we are unworthy or inadequate. With the inner critic, we still act, speak, and make choices, yet we feel endlessly criticized. The judgmental mind draws not upon all that is wise, but upon Mara: the patterns of aversion, doubt, ill will, and fear. Rarely is the judgmental heart the source of wise action or speech, nor does it lead to the end of suffering. The judgmental mind is suffering and compounds suffering.

Discriminating wisdom is essential and must be cultivated. The judgmental mind is optional; it can be understood and released. Thomas Merton, the great Christian mystic described the essence of the spiritual path as a search for truth that springs from

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love. Beneath the Bodhi tree, Mara's power over Siddhartha ended the moment he was able to look Mara in the eye and simply say, "I know you." Those few words were a reflection of a profound shift in Siddhartha's heart: the shift from being intimidated and overpowered by Mara to having the courage to open a dialogue of understanding with Mara, and bring intimidation to an end.

The judgmental mind that causes so much pain in our lives cannot be exempted from our practice. The judgmental mind needs to be met with the same courage and investigation we bring to any other afflictive emotion. The judgmental mind does not respond well to suppression, avoidance, or aversion. It needs kindness and understanding. The late Jiyu-Kennett Roshi, a Zen teacher, said the training of liberation begins with compassion for the self, and that cultivating a non-judgmental mind toward

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ourselves is the key to a genuine compassion for all beings.

We begin this process by asking what a non-judgmental mind looks like, and what it means to be free of the burden of the inner critic. To understand these questions experientially, we need to turn our attention to the judgmental mind and embrace its pain with the same mindfulness we would bring to a pain in our body or to another's sorrow.

The essence of mindfulness is to see, to understand, and to find freedom within everything that feels intractable and clouded by confusion. Mindfulness is a present-moment experience, concerned with embracing and understanding the entirety of each moment with tenderness, warmth, and interest. In the light of this engaged attention, we discover it is impossible to hate or fear anything we truly understand, including the judgmental mind. We begin to see that the greatest barrier to compassion and freedom is not the pain or adversity we meet in our lives but the ongoing tendency to criticize and fear the simple truths of the moment. Instead of just wanting the judgmental mind to go away, we could begin to ask what it is teaching us. Abhirupa Nanda, a nun from the time of the Buddha, suggested meditating on the unconditioned. Liberate the tendency to judge yourself as being above, below, or the same as others. By penetrating deeply into judgment, you will live at peace.

Although it may seem so, we were not born with a judgmental, aversive mind. It is a learned way of seeing and relating, and it can be unlearned. Looking closely at the judgmental mind, we see that it is rarely truthful or able to see the whole of anything. Instead, the judgmental mind is governed by seizing upon the particulars of ourselves and others and mistaking those particulars for the truth. A friend neglects to return a phone call, and this triggers a cascade of anxious thinking that convinces us they are an indifferent person or we are unworthy of their attention.

We arrive late for an appointment and in moments the inner critic determines we are a mindless failure. The practice of meditation, of discovering what is true, suggests there is another path that can be followed.

In the Sufi tradition it is suggested that our thoughts should pass through three gates. At the first gate, we ask of our thought, "Is it true?" If so, we let the thought pass through to the second gate, where we ask, "Is it necessary or useful?" If this also is so, we let the thought continue on its way to the third gate, where we ask, "Is this thought rooted in love and kindness?" Judgmental thoughts, which are neither true, helpful, nor kind, falter at the gates.

Students often wonder why the judgmental mind does not appear in the traditional list of afflictions that Siddhartha met under the Bodhi tree. Perhaps it is because the judgmental mind is not one affliction or hindrance but a compounded hindrance. If you explore just one moment during which the inner critic is operating, you sense how the winds of all of the hindrances flow through it. There is craving, which takes form in the expectations and ideals we hold for ourselves and others. There

is restlessness and worry—the shoulds and expectations generating endless thought and emotion as we struggle to avoid imperfection. And there is aversion and ill will, directed toward ourselves and others when our shoulds and expectations are disappointed. Doubt makes a powerful appearance too—doubt of our worthiness, goodness, and capacity. Then there is the affliction of dullness, which makes a disguised appearance in the form of despair, resignation, and numbness.

Holding all of these afflictions together are the beliefs we have regarding who we are and who we are not, which continually fuel the afflictive emotions. But the path of awakening invites us to understand this compound of the inner critic, to learn how to loosen its hold and power, and to rediscover all that is true within ourselves and others. The path invites us to extend kindness to ourselves and all beings and to learn to see a thought as a thought, rather than as a description of reality. On the path, we can begin to see that self-judgment or judgment of another is no more than a thought that is laden with ill will and aversion. There is a profound liberation in knowing this so deeply that we can let go of ill will.

The Buddha taught that what we dwell upon becomes the shape of our mind. If we dwell on ill will, directed outwardly or inwardly in the form of blame, disparagement, or aversion, it will become the shape of our mind until all that we see is that which is flawed. In India there is a saying that when a pickpocket meets a saint in the marketplace, all he sees are the saint's pockets. Habit and awareness do not co-exist.

We can learn to pause and to listen deeply to the voice of the inner judge, with its endless symphony of blame and shame, and we can surround it with the kindness of mindfulness. The alchemy of mindfulness is to nurture a sense of possibility. We are encouraged to imagine a life free from ill will, blame, and shame. To imagine a life and a heart of compassion, wisdom, and peace. ♦