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Mindfulness Meditation for Stress Reduction

Self-Criticism

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“What’s the worst part about this?,” my teaching mentor kept asking during private check-ins with meditation practitioners. These practitioners had requested check-ins because they felt stuck, or even miserable, during a seven-day silent meditation retreat. As part of my teacher training some years ago, I was observing check-ins with practitioners who’d voluntarily agreed to my sitting-in.

As I listened to these intimate exchanges, I was amazed to hear an almost uniform response to my mentor’s question: the “worst part” was their own self-criticism.

Over and over, a meditation practitioner would relay a difficult personal, work, or family situation and the emotions or numbness that had resulted. Then, they’d report a thick overlay of painful self-criticism. This self-criticism was not the same as the inner discernment that inspires us to greatness. Rather, this criticism crushed the spirit with a sense of personal failure. *I should, they’d say, know better, be over this by now, not make such a big deal, not feel so much when there’s so little I can do, not be so sensitive, dumb, needy, ineffectual.* Over and over, the self-talk was far more painful than the initial difficult situation. Once the meditation practitioners recognized the pain of the self-abnegation, a thawing followed and they softened toward themselves. My heart also softened with compassion. I knew how painful that self-criticism was...I knew it from the inside-out.

During that same meditation retreat, after a heart-opening morning of observing check-ins, I would walk into my own petri dish of self-criticism: the dining hall. The only sounds in the dining hall during silent retreats are the clinking of utensils and the scraping of chairs. Without the distractions of verbal socializing, each person is ostensibly immersed their own present-moment experience of “mindful eating,” enjoying the sensuality of tasting, chewing, and rolling textures around in the mouth.

Despite the lack of talk in the dining hall or elsewhere on a silent retreat, there’s still tons of chatter. Silent retreats are not silent at all! During retreats, our minds spray out mental chatter like a flywheel on a motor boat sprays out water. This spray of thought is no different than the mental chatter occurring in daily life. However, during a retreat we try to notice the spray...and the flywheel, itself...and that which turns the wheel. It’s an exploration that has left me gasping and humbled by the realization that there’s nothing tangible turning the wheel—nothing...and yet the flywheel continues its spray of thoughts.

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It's when we believe these thoughts, thoughts sprayed out of nothingness, that things can go awry. Especially when the thoughts are mean-spirited. My experience of eating during retreats—eating at any time, really—was a torturous experience as long as I believed the thoughts that told me I was eating *too much*, or *too little*, or was *just too obsessed with food*. And surely others were noticing what I was eating and silently tsk-tsk-ing. Oh, and I haven't even mentioned the body image issues. What was *wrong* with me?

And, therein, was *worst part*: the crushing assumption that I was...*wrong*. In Buddhism, this self-criticism, this painful reactivity to our own experience, is sometimes referred to as the "second arrow."

The Buddha once asked a student, "If a person is struck by an arrow is it painful?" The student replied, "It is." The Buddha then asked, "If the person is struck by a second arrow, is that even more painful?" The student replied again, "It is." The Buddha then explained, "In life, we cannot always control the first arrow. However, the second arrow is our reaction to the first. This second arrow is optional."

Paradoxically, I was also grateful for my second arrows—my own painful reactivity of self-criticism. The pain had brought me to mindfulness practices. That which tortures us also motivates us to seek another way. For example, we may be content staying asleep if our dreams are innocuous, but nightmares make us sit bolt upright and pay attention. For this reason it's taught in some Buddhist traditions that the human life provides more favorable conditions for "waking up" than do the heavenly *deva* realms. I.e., the heavenly realms lack sufficient suffering to motivate the *devas* to wake up.

Another reason for feeling grateful for my own self-criticism is that this self-created suffering connects me to others and to something greater. This connection might be understood to be the "light" in Leonard Cohen's poem, below.

*Ring the bells that still can ring
Forget your perfect offering
There is a crack in everything
That's how the light gets in.*

Indeed, when I'd observed practitioners' check-ins with my mentor, I'd felt connected and compassionate. It was the cracks, wrought by their own self-criticism, that connected us.

So, do I hate the self-criticism that embattles my spirit through food and body image issues? Yes. Am I also grateful for its motivating me to practice mindfulness and for its connecting me with others? Honestly, it depends on what day you ask me. I do know that the more I practice and teach mindfulness, the less I believe that my self-worth has anything to do with what I eat or what I look like. In the stead of this belief is more access to the clear landscape of nothingness and the warm truth of our shared human experience.

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