

Finding Freedom From Our Negative Patterns

It's about opening fully, even in difficult situations, and finding the freedom within awareness. Teachings on liberating the mind from painful habits, addictions, and repetitive thoughts by **Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche**, **Joan Sutherland**, **Jan Chozen Bays**, and **Chönyi Taylor**.

Reconnecting With Ourselves

In order to heal our painful habits, says **Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche**, we need to turn our attention inward and reconnect with our experience through stillness, silence, and spaciousness.

Through the negative, habitual patterns of distraction and restlessness, we frequently disconnect from ourselves. As a result, we are often depleted, for we do not fully receive what life offers, what nature offers, or what other people offer, and we don't recognize opportunities to benefit others.

You may be sitting on a bench in a beautiful park, yet not be seeing the trees, hearing the birds, or smelling the blossoms. Perhaps you are distracted with your cellphone or worrying about something, and though you are breathing you may have no actual relationship to your body, your speech, your mind, or to the park. I refer to this as sitting on a rotten karmic cushion.

This can happen anywhere—in a business meeting or at the family dinner table. You may even be at a lovely party, but your mind is not part of the celebration. Caught up in thoughts about some problem, we strategize solutions, but this never brings satisfaction because it never reconnects us to ourselves. In truth, our thoughts and strategies are the imaginations of our pain body, pain speech, and pain mind—the ego or identity

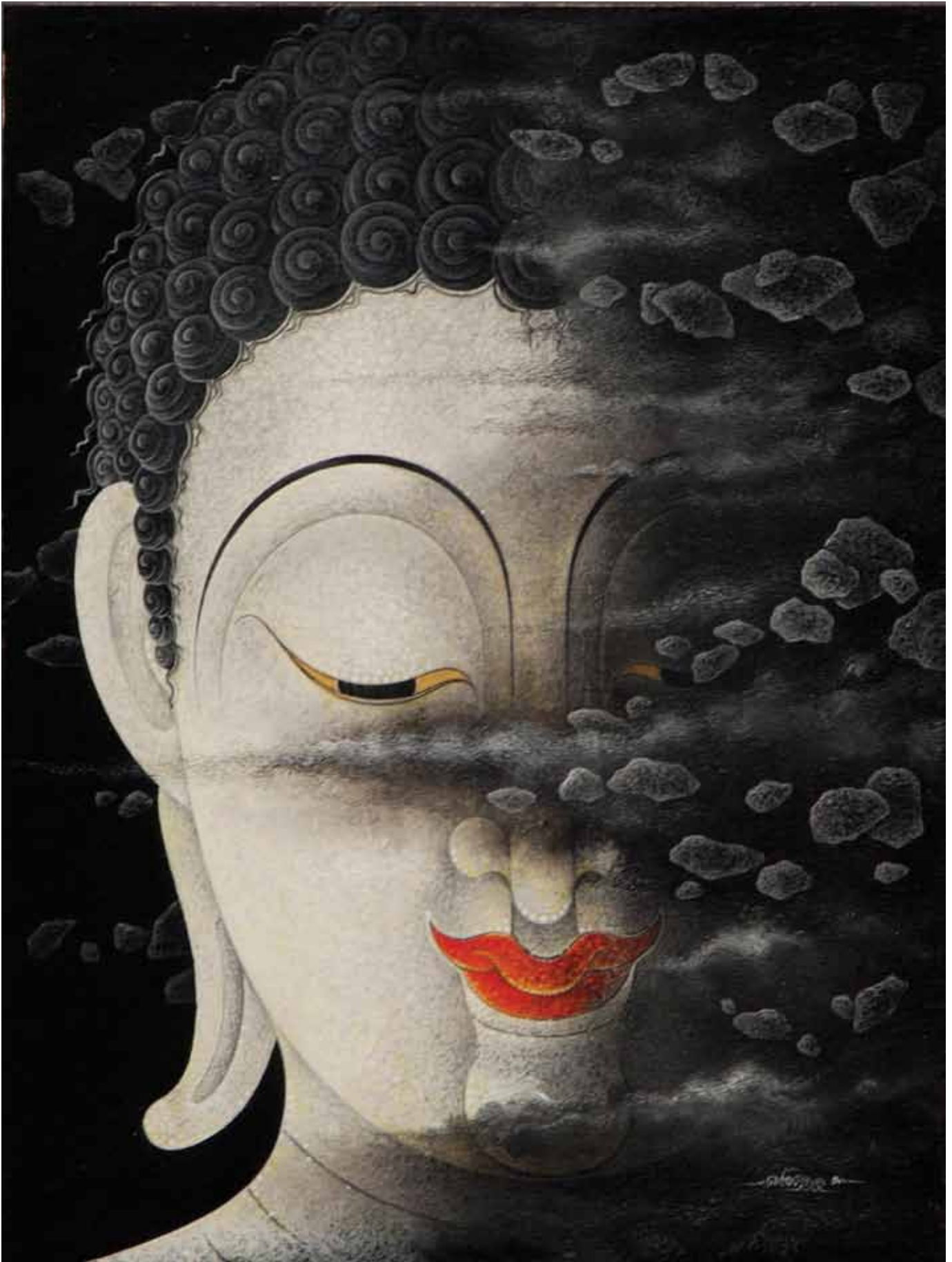
we mistake as “me” simply because it is so familiar. Trying to improve ego does not bring liberation from suffering; it only reinforces the disconnection.

It is very important to acknowledge that suffering exists and to have the proper relationship with it. The root cause of suffering is ignorance, the failure to recognize the true nature of mind, which is always open and clear and the source of all positive qualities. By failing to recognize our true nature, we search for happiness outside ourselves. This fundamental disconnection from the actual source of positive qualities within, and the restless search for satisfaction outside ourselves is something we do habitually, yet we often don't even experience this as suffering because it doesn't seem all that dramatic.

Until we recognize this pain identity and truly acknowledge our own disconnection, there is no path of healing available and we will not realize our full potential in this life. So acknowledging suffering is the first step, and a beautiful one, because it is the first step on the journey to awakening the sacred body, authentic speech, and luminous mind—which is who we truly are when we are fully present in each moment.

DISCOVERING INNER REFUGE

We begin by acknowledging the habitual patterns that arise from our disconnection from ourselves, which I refer to as pain body, pain speech, and pain mind. We may experience this disconnection in a variety of ways, such as irritation,

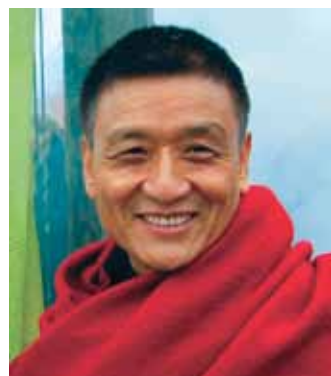


boredom, restlessness, sadness, or an underlying feeling that something is missing. If we are to heal or awaken from these patterns, we need to generate a caring relationship with the evidence of our disconnection. Recall how you feel supported when you are with a friend who is simply present, open, and nonjudgmental, and bring those very qualities to your own experience. The silence containing this fullness of the presence of another is always there within you and always beautiful. So that is exactly how you need to experience your pain. Connect with stillness, silence, and spaciousness, which enables you to observe, allow, and feel whatever you experience without judgment.

So often we identify with our pain—I am so sad. I can't believe you said that to me. You hurt me. Who is this *me* that is sad, angry, and hurt? It is one thing to experience pain; it is another thing to *be* pain. This self is ego and the fundamental suffering of ego is that it has no connection to what is.

In the middle of a confused or disconnected experience, or even at a seemingly ordinary moment, draw your attention inward. Do you experience the stillness that becomes available? It sounds easy and therefore may not seem very convincing as a remedy for suffering, yet it can take years or even a lifetime to make that simple shift and discover what becomes available when you do. Some people may not make the shift and may always perceive the world as potentially dangerous and threatening. But if you're able to make that shift again and again, it can transform your identity and experience. Being aware of a moment of agitation or restlessness and knowing there is another way to experience it—to turn one's attention inward and connect with the fundamental stillness of being—is the discovery of inner refuge through stillness.

When you turn your attention inward, you may notice competing internal voices. Turn toward the silence. Simply hear the silence that is available. Most of the time we do not listen to the silence but



TENZIN WANGYAL RINPOCHE is the spiritual director of Ligmincha Institute, based in Nelson County, Virginia. His latest book is *Awakening the Sacred Body*.

listen to our thoughts—we negotiate, we strategize, and we are pleased when we come up with a good solution, confusing this with clarity. Sometimes we try not to think about something and push it out of our mind and distract ourselves with other things. This is all noise, and considered pain speech. When we listen to the silence that is available in any given moment, whether we are in the middle of a busy airport or sitting at a holiday dinner table, our inner noise dissolves. In this way we discover inner refuge through silence.

When you have lots of thoughts, turn toward the spacious aspect of the mind. Spaciousness is always available because that is the nature of mind—it is open and clear. Don't try to reject, control, or stop your thoughts. Simply allow them. Host them. Look at thinking as it is. It is like trying to catch a rainbow. As you go toward it, you simply find space. In this way you discover inner refuge through spaciousness.

It is important to neither reject nor invite thoughts. If you look at thought directly and nakedly, thought cannot sustain itself. If you reject thought, that is another thought. And that thought is only a smarter ego: "I am outsmarting that thought by observing it. Oh, there it is." And there you are, talking to yourself, holding on to the credential of being the observer of thoughts. The mind that strategizes is itself the creator of our suffering, and no matter how elegant or refined our strategy, it is still a version of the pain mind. So instead of coming up with a winning strategy, we must shift our relationship with pain mind altogether by hosting our thoughts, observing our thoughts, and then allow the observer to dissolve as well.

What is left you may wonder? You have to find out by directly and nakedly observing. The mind that wonders what is left if we don't rely on thinking or observing our experience can't discover the richness of the openness of being. We need to look directly into our thinking, busy mind to discover the inner refuge of spaciousness, and thereby discover the luminous mind. Fortunately, others who have gone before us have done so and provide pointing-out instructions and encouragement for us.

TRANSFORMING PAINFUL HABITS THROUGH OPEN AWARENESS

When ego is the result of disconnection, awareness itself is true connection. Awareness that is direct and naked is described as the sun, and the warmth of awareness dissolves the solidified pain identity the way the sun melts ice. So whenever you feel

the pain of being disconnected from yourself, be open to it and be with it. Host your pain well with presence that is completely open, and most important, nonjudgmental.

Can you be open with your pain—still, silent, spacious? There is nothing better than open awareness for transforming pain, and that tool is within you at this very moment. The method of transforming pain into the path of liberation has no conceptual aspect, it is simply being open. In open awareness, everything is processed. There is no unfinished business.

Another beautiful thing about open awareness is that it is like light. And light does not recognize the history of darkness—how long, how intense, or how complex the darkness is. Light simply illuminates darkness. Like the sun, it is not selective, and the moment it shines, darkness is dispelled. The moment you are aware, your negative patterns are dispelled.

FINDING THE CLOSEST DOOR

Stillness, silence, and spaciousness bring us to the same place—open awareness. But you go for refuge through a particular door: one through the body, one through speech, one through mind. Once you arrive, which door you entered through is no longer important. The door is only important when you are lost. If you are lost on the eastern side of the mountain, it is better to find the eastern path because it is the path closest to you. When we fly we are always reminded by the flight attendant that “the nearest exit could be right behind you.” The closest entrance is right here with you. The tension in your neck and shoulders could be your closest entrance. Your Inner Critic could be your closest entrance. Your doubting, hesitating mind could be your closest entrance. But we often overlook the opportunities right in front of us and take the farthest possible route. It is interesting how often we don’t value that which is closest.

If open awareness is so simple, and any given moment of distraction, irritation, or anger is our doorway, why do we not turn toward our discomfort and discover a deeper truth? We are simply not very familiar with openness and we don’t trust that it is sufficient. Turning our attention inward seems like the easiest thing to do, yet we don’t do it.

A PRESCRIPTION FOR INNER REFUGE

How is it possible to become more familiar with inner refuge? If we are ill and are given a prescription for medicine that we’ve been told is absolutely necessary for our recovery and well-being, we are motivated to take our medicine. So perhaps we need to think of turning toward inner refuge as taking the medicine that will release us from our habit of disconnecting from the source of being. You have three pills to take: the pill of stillness, the pill of silence, the pill of spaciousness.

Start by taking at least three pills a day. You can choose when to take stillness, when to take silence, or when to take spaciousness as your medicine. Actually, if you pay attention, opportunities

will choose you. When you are rushing, you become agitated. Your agitation has chosen you. At that very moment say, “Thank you, agitation. You have reminded me to take the pill of stillness.” Breathe in slowly and go toward your agitation with openness. Your stillness is right in the midst of your agitation. Don’t distract yourself and reject this moment, thinking you will try to find stillness later or somewhere else. Discover the stillness right here within your agitation.

The moment you hear complaint in your voice you can recognize this as the time to take the pill of silence. What do you do? Go toward your complaints. Be open. Hear the silence within your voice. Silence *is* within your voice because silence is the nature of sound. Don’t search for silence, rejecting sound. That is not possible. Likewise, don’t look for stillness, rejecting movement.

It is the same with the door of the mind. When your mind is going crazy with thoughts, take the pill of spaciousness. Remember, don’t look for space by rejecting your thoughts—space is already here. It is important to make that discovery, and to make it again and again. The only reason you don’t find it is because it is closer than you realize.

So that is my prescription. May the medicine of stillness, silence, and spaciousness liberate the suffering experienced through the three doors of body, speech, and mind—and in so doing, may you benefit many others through the infinite positive qualities that become available. **BD**

The moment you are aware,
your negative patterns are dispelled.

(Opposite)
Untitled, 2008
by Cathy Daley

Gaining Perspective

When you're caught in your habitual patterns, says **Joan Sutherland**, try not to fixate on your reactions. Instead cultivate awareness of everything that is happening in the moment.

Sometimes it can seem as though being human is a problem that spiritual practice is meant to solve. But Buddhist meditative and related practices actually have a different focus: developing our human faculties to see more clearly the true nature of things, so that we can participate in and respond to how things are in a more generous and helpful way. Our individual awakenings become part of the world's awakening. This means leaning into life, and to do that we have to recognize what gets in the way. For each of us, this is likely to include certain habitual patterns of thinking and feeling in reaction to what we encounter.

Meditation and inquiry are methods, ways to have direct experiences of the deepest insights of our tradition—of the interpermeation of all things and the way things, including our habitual reactions, rise into existence for awhile and then fall away again. Everything is provisional, and everything influences everything else. The implication for our inner lives is that they are seamless with the outer world, and constantly changing with it. We're not encapsulated consciousnesses bouncing around in a world of other consciousnesses and inert matter, but part of a vibrant, ever-changing field that encompasses everything we can experience, and more. Everything is rising and falling in this field, sometimes for a nanosecond and sometimes for a geological age, but still appearing and disappearing in an infinitely complex web of other things doing the same. To the extent that we experience, in the ordinary moments of our lives, the seamlessness of our inner states and outer



JOAN SUTHERLAND, Roshi is a Zen koan teacher and the founder of Awakened Life in Santa Fe, New Mexico.

circumstances, we're being more realistic, more in tune with the way things actually are.

From this perspective, how do we deal with the habitual patterns of heart and mind that inhibit us from having a more realistic understanding of life, and a more intimate engagement with it? Perhaps it becomes less important to tackle the thoughts and feelings directly, to *do* something about them, than it is to see them in their true proportion. A reaction, after all, is just one thing among many appearing in the field at that particular moment, no more or less important than anything else.

Simply put, how we react is not the most important element of any situation. When we fixate on our reactions, they pull us away from a primary experience of what's actually happening, into a small room where how we think and feel about the experience becomes the most important thing, the thing we're now in relationship with. If you and I are having a conversation and I become angry, I might find my emotions so compelling that suddenly I'm not in a conversation with you anymore, but with my anger. *What's wrong with this person? This must not stand!* Then, particularly if I'm involved in a spiritual practice, I'm likely to have reactions to my reactions. *After all this meditation, I shouldn't be getting angry like this!* Or, *This is righteous anger!* Now I'm in the third order of experience, moving further and further away from the actual conversation with you.

If we pull the camera back for a wider view, it's immediately apparent that a reaction like this is only one of many things rising in any given moment in the field. There's you and me and our surroundings, your mood, my capacity for misunderstanding, the temperature of the air, the sound of birds or traffic outside the window and the neighborhood beyond that, the most recent calamity in the news, and more other phenomena than we can possibly take into account. The moment is vast, with a lot of space between the things in it. The moment is generous. I don't have to zero in on my reaction, to act impulsively on it or repudiate it or improve it, all of which tend to reinforce the sense of its importance, but just accept it as one (small) part of what's happening. Usually that simple shift changes everything. It allows us to step out of the small room of second-order experience and back into a fuller, more realistic experience of the moment.

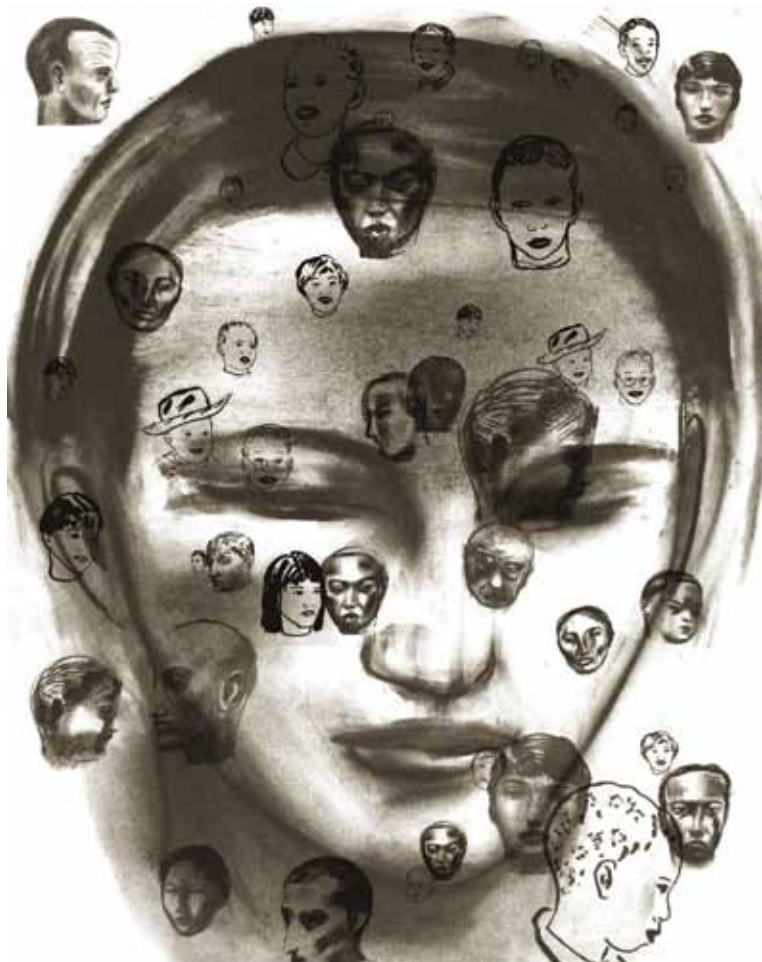


Habits can be deeply ingrained, but over time it's possible that even a quite troublesome reaction can assume its proper size and shape as one thing among many, rising and falling with everything else.

If reaction is a move into the partial, a privileging of how we think and feel above everything else, response emerges from the whole of oneself, grounded in the whole situation, with each element assuming its true size and shape. In responding we're not doing something *about* a situation, but participating *in* it.

It's interesting that our evaluation of a habitual reaction as negative doesn't arise until the third order of experience, fully two circles away from what's actually happening: it's our reaction to our reaction to what's happening. The ancients called this putting a head on top of your head. Not only are we distancing ourselves from the original situation, but even from our reaction to the situation. That kind of distancing can be a defense against a reaction that's causing unease out of proportion to its proportion, as it were, and that's when inquiry can be useful.

The basic inquiry is *What is this?* And it's a way back to what we're trying to avoid. We drop the self-centered focus of the third order of experience and re-enter the second, encountering our reaction directly, without preconceptions and even with interest. We've picked up one thing from the field and are taking a closer look for a while. We inquire into whatever *What is this?* evokes—thoughts, feelings, sensations, images, memories. The unexpected and surprising are particularly valuable, because they come from somewhere other than what we can usually imagine. Habits can be deeply ingrained, but over time it's possible that even a quite troublesome reaction can assume its proper size and shape as one thing among many, rising and falling with everything else, no longer especially inhibiting or especially fascinating. And we move closer to a life lived in response instead of reaction, closer to participation in the way things actually are. **BD**



Getting to Know Your Inner Critic

Jan Chozen Bays explains how to recognize and tame the critical commentary we replay in our minds.

Once when the Buddha was injured by an enemy, he spent hours meditating on the physical sensations of pain, without giving in to mental or emotional distress. Finally he lay down to rest. Mara the Evil One appeared and berated him. “Why are you lying down? Are you in a daze or drunk? Don’t you have any goals to accomplish?” The Buddha recognized Mara and said, “I’m not drunk or in a daze. I’ve reached the goal and am free of sorrow. I lie down full of compassion for living beings.” Then Mara, sad and disappointed, disappeared.

In this story Mara is depicted as an external entity. However, I have found that the most insidious obstacle actually arises from within. It is called the Inner Critic. If left unrecognized and unchecked, it creates a pattern of negative inner comments that can undermine our well-being and destroy our creativity, attacking our work when we’ve written just a few sentences,

sung just a few notes, or painted only few strokes. Even worse, it can destroy our spiritual practice.

The Inner Critic criticizes whatever is in front of it. For example, if you don’t go to a meditation retreat, it says, “You aren’t very serious about your practice.” If you do go to the retreat it says, “You wasted so much time daydreaming during that retreat, you should have stayed home.” A hallmark of the Inner Critic is that it often puts us in a double bind, damned if we practice and damned if we don’t.

How can we work with the Inner Critic? The story of the Buddha gives us some clues. Just as the Buddha recognized Mara, we need to recognize the Inner Critic not as the truth, but as a single voice among many. You can even give it a name. “Oh, hi there Mr. Negativity. What are you so worked up about now?”

For the Inner Critic does indeed get worked up. It arises

(Opposite)
Untitled, 2005
by Vivienne Flesher

in childhood, trying to keep us from getting into trouble. It reviews our mistakes endlessly, in an attempt to prevent future errors or failures. It believes that the best way to ensure our happiness is to berate us about our shortcomings. It doesn't realize that it is also stealing our innate capacity for happiness. As we grow older, it can infiltrate our mind so thoroughly that we don't realize that we have fallen into a pervasively negative pattern of thinking about ourselves. When this happens, people begin to think of themselves as "defective" or "broken."

I point out to students that they would never rent and watch the same painful movie two hundred and fifty times. And yet they allow their mind to play painful episodes from the past over and over. "Remember when you made that stupid mistake? Let's run that mind movie again, and again, and again." We need to tell the Inner Critic that we aren't stupid. We only need to review our past mistakes once or twice, then move on with determination to change.

It helps to get some perspective on the damage a strong Inner Critic can do. Imagine that you heard a mother in a supermarket saying out loud to her three-year-old child what your Inner Critic says to you. "You're an idiot! I've told you a million times not to do that. You're hopeless!" We would all recognize these statements as harmful, or even abusive. No one, a child, a pet, or a plant, can thrive under that pattern of negative attack. And yet we allow our Inner Critic to attack us in this way, repeatedly.

The Buddha was quite clear about not giving energy to afflictive thoughts. He divided all his thoughts into two classes, those that led to enlightenment and those

JAN CHOZEN BAYS is co-abbot of Great Vow Zen Monastery in Clatskanie, Oregon, where she leads workshops on transforming the Inner Critic. Her forthcoming book is *How to Train a Wild Elephant & Other Adventures in Mindfulness* (Shambhala Publications, July).



JENNIFER BRINKMAN

Just as the Buddha recognized Mara,
we need to recognize the Inner Critic
not as the truth but as a single voice
among many.

that led away. He cultivated the former and put aside the latter. If you recognize the Inner Critic and stop feeding it mental energy, its power will weaken.

How can we cultivate a voice to subdue the Inner Critic? Through metta, loving-kindness practice. We can meditate as the Buddha did, full of compassion for living beings—including ourselves. We can breathe out the silent phrases, "May I be free from anxiety and fear. May I be at ease." We can even direct these phrases toward the Inner Critic, because this is the very part of us that is chronically anxious and fearful. It is desperately afraid

that we will make a mistake, lose our job, be unloved, become homeless, grow old, become ill and die—which of course, eventually, we will.

Indeed, there is often a kernel of truth in what the Inner Critic says. Yes, I was drowsy during that last meditation period. However, that does not mean that I am bad, stupid, or hopeless. It just means that I had a sleepy period. Now I will drop the past and do my best during the next period. When we can hear what the Critic says and take away the anger, the sting, the invidious comparisons of self and other, then it is transformed into the voice of discriminating wisdom and determination.

Ultimately, the only sure cure for the Inner Critic is to practice. The Critic relies upon an idea of a self—a small self—that is imperfect and must be fixed. It feeds on comparing, on thoughts of past and future, of mistakes and anxieties. The Inner Critic has no traction in the present moment. When our minds become quiet, when we are resting in this very moment, there is no past or future, there is no comparing. The small self expands to become a huge field of calm awareness in which sensations, thoughts, and voices come and go. Everything is just as it is, perfect in its own place, interconnected with every other piece of the whole. Every being also is perfect as it is, including the temporary collection of energy we call our self.

Every morning at the monastery we remind ourselves of this truth as we chant, "buddhanature pervades the whole universe, existing right here now." In us, as us. Nothing is broken. **BD**

On Your Mark, Get Set... Don't Go

Chönyi Taylor presents a meditation to familiarize yourself with the triggers that set off addictive behaviors.

The triggers for our addictions are those things or thoughts that set off an automatic reaction in such a way that we find ourselves in our addictive pattern without knowing how we got there.

The triggers might be external, or internal, or both. An external event such as a song can set off an internal trigger such as loneliness. We may not be aware of hearing the song, just that the feeling of loneliness has welled up again and we want to escape from it. We may not be aware of the loneliness, just the thought of wanting to fix some dissatisfaction. We may not be aware of the dissatisfaction, just of taking or doing whatever will ease it. We may not even be aware of what we're doing, but then suddenly realize we are back in the grip of addiction.

If we can identify the trigger, we can disarm its effect and no longer be caught in that particular compulsion. To find what triggers our addiction, we need to sit and contemplate. As we identify the immediate triggers, we often find other, more subtle ones. Sometimes when people discover another trigger, they feel that what they did before was wrong or a waste of time. Don't get caught in that trap. Any addiction usually has more than one trigger.

MEDITATION FOR FINDING TRIGGERS

This meditation focuses on what happened just before you indulged in your addiction so that you can identify the immediate trigger.

Begin by thinking about how your addiction has harmed you or others, and how you would



As you become aware of the moments before you fall into your addictive pattern, you gain more power to protect yourself from the compulsiveness of that pattern.

like to stop creating harm in this way. Generate the motivation to first clear obstacles from your mind that stop you from thinking clearly and then to fill your mind with love and wisdom. Tune in to the energy of pure compassionate wisdom, feeling that you are being nurtured by this energy.

Slow your mind down by being aware of your breathing for a few minutes. Now bring to mind a recent time when you indulged in your addiction and focus on the moment when you started. Go back a fraction of time to when you were just about to engage in your addiction. Meditate on that moment.

External Triggers

Try to build up a vivid awareness of your surroundings at that time. Imagine this past event as a present experience. Where are you? Are there people around or are you alone? What can you see? What smells are there? What taste is in your mouth and what sounds can you hear? Is your body aching, or numb? Are you comfortable or uncomfortable? Any of these things might be an external trigger. View the trigger with equanimity. Stay with your awareness of this for as long as you can.

Internal Triggers

Continue by building up a vivid awareness of what was happening in your mind at that time. Did you have any pain? Were you stressed? Were you winding down? Were you winding up? Had you just had a fight? Were you lonely? Had someone disappointed you or

had you disappointed yourself? Was there someone or some people you were trying to impress? Did you feel cheated by life? Were you unable to cope? What else?

Any of these might be internal triggers. View them with equanimity. Stay with your awareness of that moment as long and as vividly as you can. Know clearly those aspects of the moment that were triggers setting you off into the addiction. Acknowledge to yourself that this is your reality, and addiction is, or has been, the way in which you cope with your reality.

Closing the Meditation

Allow yourself to abide in the energy of pure compassionate wisdom. Imagine this energy being absorbed into your body and healing all hurt and pain and sickness. Allow your body to feel relaxed, at ease. Imagine this energy of pure compassionate wisdom being absorbed into every part of your mind, healing all negative emotions and leaving your mind peaceful and calm. Rest in that state as long as you can.

Dedication

Take pleasure in what you have achieved in this meditation, even if parts of what you remembered were painful. Make a conscious choice to use the energy that comes from this pleasure to continue making positive changes to your life.

Further Work on Finding Triggers

This meditation needs to be repeated often if you want to get a better feeling for the addiction triggers. As you become more aware of the moments before you fall into your addictive pattern, you can more easily change the pattern. As you repeat the meditation, take it back to just before the moment that preceded the addictive behavior, then a fraction earlier than that, then a fraction earlier still, and so on. As you do this, you gain more power to protect yourself from the compulsiveness of an addictive pattern. You can keep uncovering levels of dissatisfaction and pain. Having done that, you can start to find other ways of dealing with dissatisfaction and pain. **ED**



CHÖNYI TAYLOR was ordained as a Buddhist nun by the Dalai Lama in 1996. She is a retired psychotherapist and honorary lecturer in psychological medicine at Sydney University. This teaching is adapted from her book *Enough! A Buddhist Approach to Finding Release from Addictive Patterns*, published by Snow Lion.