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Compassion and the Inner Critic
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Let's think about this experience of compassion. Remember what it's like when you're with someone who's offering you this quality of compassion, someone who is being with you in a compassionate way. It's very uncontrived. It's quite natural, just like a movement of response, like someone is actually with us, and open to where we are.

The word compassion means "to feel with." It's not like that person is getting entangled in our suffering. It's not so helpful when our friend gets wrapped up in our suffering and suffers with us. It's more like they can be a steady presence, supporting us as we are wobbling and when we are distressed.

Recognizing the Inner Critic

In these reflections, I want to talk about something that limits our compassion towards ourselves and others. This is the conditioning of the inner critic. It is a way of thinking, or feeling, or sensing that takes an experience in the present moment—an event, activity, or behavior—and evaluates it in terms of being right or wrong, good or bad: "It shouldn't be this way, it should be like this." This is the evaluation part of the inner critic.

Then this critical pattern frames the behavior or experience in terms of "me" and "mine." It frames it as a personal flaw. Something's happened, it's been judged, now it's identified with and framed as a personal flaw.

As an example, we're meditating and the bell goes, and suddenly we realize we've been drowsy or sleepy, or even asleep, for most of that meditation period. We might have started with the intention to be really clear, and stay on the breath. Then the bell goes and we realize we've not been awake and aware but asleep and out of it. The event in this sense is sleepiness, drowsiness.

Next this narrative of the inner critic comes in saying things like, "There you go again, drowsy during your meditation. Not a very good meditation. A waste of time." It has various judgments and ways of perceiving, comprehending what has happened. And you can see in this phrasing it's made about "me", it's made about who I am, and framed as a personal flaw.

When this pattern is present, we disconnect from the direct experience of drowsiness in the moment because we've made it wrong and a personal failing. We've actually compounded the suffering. We've created another loop, another layer. In this whole process we've become disconnected from the experience as it simply is in the moment.

Being with Experience is Compassion

I find it helpful to contemplate how we grow and learn. We grow when we have permission to discover, permission to explore, permission to make mistakes, just like children are given space to discover, rather than our experience being something we have got wrong and therefore need to fix. I found in meditation that when I brought an openness, a curiosity about what's this actually like in this moment—how does drowsiness feel in the body, and in the mind?—this attitude brings awareness into the equation. It's not judging. It's not even trying to fix. We're simply present and receptive. Curious. There's a process of discovery that starts to open up. This is the quality of compassion, the simple gesture of coming alongside, coming to meet, directly receiving the experience that's here.

Let's look at how this relates to what we've been sharing about perceptions of impermanence, imperfection, and recognizing the emptiness of the sense of self. Just in this example, you can see that when we identify with drowsiness as a personal flaw, it becomes a fixed sense of who and what we are. It creates a more rigid view of who and what we are. This creates the suffering of blame, of making wrong, and then trying to get it right in terms of who and what we are.

When we recognize this loop and reconnect with the moment, then compassion is expressed in a gesture of receptivity. We feel curious and present, without the barrier of judgment. We feel a potential and capacity to tolerate and open to changing conditions and feeling tones. When awareness is present, we can feel that changing movement. It's like a flow.

We can even be curious about the places in between. When something feels pleasant, we may feel that subtly change. Maybe it moves to neutral, like staying in a certain posture that initially felt comfortable. Maybe it shifts subtly to being unpleasant. If we open to the unpleasant and allow it to be, there can be a space within that contraction. We can find ease amidst the changing flow of conditions. When the bell rings at the end of meditation, we notice how we respond to the bell. Be curious about this as a movement through, rather than a movement towards or away from pleasant or unpleasant feeling.

Explore the Capacity to be with what's here

The attitude we have is of interest rather than the attitude, "This shouldn't be happening." We don't need to bypass any experience that's arising. We can just explore our capacity to be with what's here. It's a curiosity about our capacity to be present rather than a demand. Feel where your threshold is, and when to back up, when to give yourself space. That's also compassion, sensing your capacity in the moment to be with the level of pain, for instance, that's arising. Do we need to take care of ourselves and find a way, if we can, to ease away from that pain? Or do

we have the capacity right now to stay with it, bear with it, and just explore the potential to abide there? In those moments, compassion can arise for the suffering caused by this judging mind.

We all have this pattern of the inner critic. As long as we have a sense of self, we have this critical narrative in relationship to it, evaluating it. But sometimes we do have moments when we're really OK with what we're experiencing, even if it's unpleasant. It's a quality of witnessing. In those moments, we can feel the suffering and have compassion for the suffering this critical mind causes. An essential element of this critical mind is that it rejects experience, and that rejection is itself painful. This quality of witnessing is an attitude of accepting and allowing: compassion. Fully meeting, fully receiving.

If you're fortunate enough to have friends who can be with you in this way, just remember what that feels like. So often we think of compassion as an urge to fix the suffering and make it go away. The quality of compassion we're talking about allows the heart to experience the pain more fully, to allow it to pass through. When we grasp or reject, we add another contraction to the pain. We actually add more suffering, more tension to this movement of the mind that's passing through.

I really invite you to be curious about your attitude towards your suffering. We're talking about how we're with experience. Do we have an open intention to really meet experience as clearly, as fully as we can? The attitude involves letting go of outcome, simply learning, simply discovering. Rather than grasping or rejecting, these qualities that we're bringing in change our relationship to suffering. So what is our experience like without this barrier of judgment? The inner critic doesn't simply judge and evaluate the experience. It also puts us down for having this experience. Compassion is the antithesis of this.

Awareness is Like Listening

I like to use the metaphor of listening, compassionate listening for how we practice awareness. It's listening with a particular attitude. Listening is a metaphor for how we are aware. If you think about listening, it includes everything. When we're looking, we tend to look at particular objects. When we're just aware of listening, all of the various sounds come. It's inclusive. Compassion is like the heart is listening. The heart is receiving this experience that's arising in the moment. It's listening to the experience of drowsiness. How is that in the body? How is the mind affected by that? This feeling of sadness or even compassionately listening to this feeling of joy.

It's a particular quality of witnessing our experience that's connected, receptive, and naturally responsive. It responds to the experience of the inner critic in recognizing how harsh it is, how often the judgments are completely out of proportion with what's actually happened. We berate

ourselves over something in a tone that we wouldn't talk to anybody else with about that incident. It's like hitting a tack with a sledgehammer. It's completely out of proportion.

As we turn attention towards these patterns in our mind, they become more visible in consciousness. That in itself changes things. It's like the inner critic is insinuating in the background, and we're making it more visible by bringing it right around to the front. There's an event that's happened, there's a narrative saying, "This is wrong," and it's making me feel wrong for it. That's the truth of what's happening.

In Our Daily Life practice, we can apply the following.

1. Notice the inner critic

In the days to come, see if you notice an incident in which the inner critic arises. Don't choose the strongest incident, but choose a time when you're feeling the impact of self judgment. The inner critic isn't a simple objective judgment. It's an evaluative judgment. A good way of recognizing the inner critic is a sense of "I'm wrong," a sense of wrongness. It often comes with the word should or shouldn't. "I should have done that; I shouldn't be that way."

2. Write a description of the situation

Once you notice this feeling of wrongness, the pressure of a "should," take time to write down the situation. What's happened such that the inner critic has arisen? For example, being drowsy in meditation. Was it something that came up after you'd been sitting? Maybe there was an evaluation of your meditation experience. Maybe it's something you said, or didn't say. Write down an objective description of the situation.

So in the example of drowsiness, it would be, "There was drowsiness. I was drowsy for most of my meditation."

3. Write down the judgment

Now write down the judgment. What completes the sentence that begins, "You should..."?

For example, "You should be able to be more aware and awake after all these years of practice. You should be more present and mindful." Or maybe you said something you regret, and the judgment might be stronger. "That's a stupid thing to have said. Why on earth did you say that? Why did you do that?"

You can notice there's a certain charge, like a put-down. And that's where the sense of wrongness comes in. Just make a note of the judgment.

4. Notice how the judgment affects you

Then the third step is to notice how that judgment affects you. How does it make you feel? Very often, the inner critic is trying to motivate us in some way, trying to help us be better at something. For example, trying to help us be less drowsy in meditation. But, actually, I have found it makes me feel like giving up. It makes me feel hopeless to a degree, more despondent. It doesn't actually do what it's trying to do. It doesn't motivate me. It undermines me. It has an undermining effect, because it's something that's being taken personally about who or what I am. The effect is undermining.

Just notice, what's the effect of this judgment? However that is for you. Maybe in some way we believe it to be true. We may partly believe it to be true. So what's it like to give this judgment credence?

We're objectifying this experience of judging, and this in itself already brings a little separation from that critical judgment. We're witnessing it and seeing it rather than being as fully entangled in it as we might be if we hadn't noticed it.

5. See if there's space to allow the original situation

In the process of separating from the judgment, see if there's a space in which you can allow the original situation.

With the example of drowsiness, I can allow the fact of drowsiness and not then take the step into judgment. Spend a moment opening to the situation: what you said, what you did, what you felt. That is a gesture of compassion. It's not rejecting, nor is it simply going along with the situation. It's not passive compliance. It's knowing the situation in a different way. Receptivity, connecting.

So directly meeting experience, what's this like in the moment? Can I let this feeling be here just as it is? Bringing in this quality of opening and allowing. Our practice of awareness, mindfulness, is this simple coming to meet what is here. My teacher Ajahn Sumedho used to often say, "This is the way it is." This is the way it is.

Allowing experience puts us in touch with the ground of awareness

Reflection on experience is an invitation to invite and receive what is. As soon as we do this, we are being present. When we are connected in this way with the present moment, we start to touch and know the ground of awareness, this background implicit quality of being aware. We can even be gently curious about that. There are the events that we're present with and this quality of ground out of which that presence arises.

So instead of this experience of, "I was drowsy. I'm no good as a meditator," the experience is simply, "Drowsiness is what has arisen. Drowsiness is what is arising." So drowsiness is what is here. It may not be what we want to be here. We had a certain idea about how we wanted our meditation to be. That's where comparison and evaluative judgment comes in, this idea of what we wished for compared to the reality of what is. If we simply go along with that evaluation, it's like we're arguing with reality. This creates its own suffering. So instead, we simply acknowledge the experience. In this example, the drowsiness. It's just drowsiness arising in this moment.

Feel the experience arising in awareness

In that presence and acceptance of reality, we also connect with the space within which it's all arising: the simple background quality of awareness. Just feel the experience arising. Feel how you may be attached to it being otherwise. We may be judging it. See all of this pattern coming together, and that compassionate allowing of it just to be the way it is. It can simply have its movement.

It's almost like this pattern has a life cycle. It arises. It lives for a time. And as we are really with it in the moment, we see it has its own changing nature. It passes. We don't have to make it change or go away. Its nature is to change and go away. If we don't reject the situation, if we don't get complicated with it, it simply passes through. I really invite you to be curious about this. Explore this in your own experience.