Working With The Judging Mind

Sally Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Three-Month Retreat (IMS 2007) · 55:46

I cut this cartoon out of the Sunday papers a while ago. It's from the strip *Rhymes with Orange* called "As Medicine Advances." The picture depicted is a person, a patient sitting on that examining table in a doctor's office in their little paper gown that one has to wear and feel very vulnerable in, and the doctor reading some results to the patient. And the doctor says, "The MRI confirms it. Your head is full of dumb and repetitive thoughts."

Meditation confirms it, too. This is our common experience as we sit down and pay attention—what we see is the mind just full of this constant commenting, a narration of and about our experience.

Here's another cartoon on it. I really think cartoonists are the modern-day philosophers, especially things like *Peanuts* or *Calvin and Hobbes*. They're what most people get as a form of philosophy. This one is from *Boondocks*—those couple of kids living with their grandfather. They're always a little challenging for him to look after. The two kids are talking to each other, and the first one says, "Sometimes I think my brain works differently than most people's. For example, do you ever, like, narrate your life in your own head as it happens, like it was a History Channel-type documentary?" And the second kid just says, "Nope." But the thought bubble from the second kid says, "And then Caesar's best friend Huey asked him yet another weird and stupid question. It would not be the last."

So we all do it. We just often don't recognize or even want to admit that that is our inner experience—of looking out from behind somewhere there and having a judgment, having a reaction, commenting on everything that happens to us and around us.

The challenge for us is that often this inner voice, this voice that comments, isn't neutral. It's not just very equanimously noting this and that. It's critical. It's judgmental. It's valuing experience over and over again, and it's comparing ourselves and others, past and future, this and that.

There's a book I read because I was interested in this topic by a man called Byron Brown, and he wrote a book called *Soul Without Shame*. This is what he says:

"Judgment is a central element of your inner dialogue, the way you talk to yourself. From that point of view, it is second nature to you, so close to you that it's hard even to become aware of its existence. However, there is a good reason to isolate this part of your inner process. Self-judgment is perhaps the greatest source of inner suffering and discontent. More than that, or because of that, it is one of the major barriers to change, growth, expansion, and transformation."

I think this is true for us in our meditation practice—in my own practice and speaking to people here on

this retreat and, of course, many other retreats. Beginning to work directly with this voice of the inner critic is one of the powerful ways our meditation practice can begin this process of transformation and healing and allow us to truly open to the freedom and happiness that's possible for us. So it can become quite a central part of our practice.

We've emphasized over and over again how important acceptance is in this practice, how it leads to equanimity. And working with the judge, this critical voice, is central to opening to a true acceptance of our experience—acceptance of ourselves, acceptance of our experience, and acceptance of others' experience. Acceptance of our body, of our moods, of our emotions, of our thoughts.

Often on retreat, it can seem to us that our judgments actually get exacerbated. "Am I always like this? All I see is judging this, and everywhere I look, instantly there's a judgment." I actually don't think that retreats increase the power of judging. I think that we're often like this, but we're able to distract ourselves or go on to the next thing or get lost in it without bringing this clarity of mindfulness to it, and so we don't notice it as much. But there is also something about the quietness of retreat practice that brings our thoughts into highlight. Perhaps both are true—it both does and doesn't increase it—but we certainly notice it more when we're on retreat. We notice, many of us, the preponderance of how many of the thoughts we have are judging thoughts, are critical thoughts.

And it's not just obviously us here in meditation. Carol spoke yesterday about how many books are out there on happiness. I've looked into this too. I think the balancing of that is how many books there are out there about judging. Because really, unless we open to and work with this judge, true happiness isn't possible for us. One of our colleagues and friends, Tara Brach, a teacher who comes here, wrote a great book called *Radical Self-Acceptance*. At Spirit Rock, we actually have many day-longs and even class series about this tendency to judgment because so many people are wounded by it and want to work with it.

So it's really a very helpful place to work within your practice. And one of the things I think is important to remember: this is not some kind of side issue that you have to get out of the way, or some aberration that you have before you can begin to meditate. You know, "If I could just stop judging..." It's really very central to these deep spiritual questions of who do we take ourselves to be? How do we relate to our inner life and our experience in the world? So not to try and push this aside or find the speedy way around this question of working with the judge—it's really very important to come to a full, open, and investigating practice around it.

For many of us, the early part—and I hesitate to define what early is; it might be one year or two years, or ten or fifteen years—many years can be spent working on this issue of self-acceptance in particular. As I say, it's so central and necessary for us to really begin the difficult work of transformation, of opening to the truths that the Buddha's path shows us. We have to have this sense of capacity, of trust, of faith in ourselves and our ability to do this work. And so we begin with self-acceptance, with looking very directly at how we relate to our inner landscape.

There's this famous quote from the Buddha where he says, "You can search throughout the entire universe for someone who is more deserving of your love and affection than you are yourself, and that person is not to be found anywhere. You yourself, as much as anyone in the entire universe, deserve your love and affection." Really quite a powerful statement.

But as we open to our inner experience and begin to look directly at the contents of the mind, at the emotions that come up, what we tend to see are the old habits, the patterns. Carol spoke about this last night—just those familiar ruts, grooves that the mind moves in. And we see that for many of us, we've actually learned to be self-critical. One of the habits that we've picked up along the way is this internalized message that we're not good enough. It can operate in all kinds of areas in our life: around our sense of self, our body, our looks, our intellectual abilities, our athletic abilities, how we did in school, how we do at work, relationships—every aspect of our life. And of course, we bring it into our spiritual life as well. Am I a good enough meditator? Am I doing it right? Are they better than me? Who's sitting longest? Who walks the slowest? Everywhere, anything can be fuel for this judging mind.

And it can get so extreme that some people even have the deeply held belief that they're bad, that they're not good in some essential way. Very painful to open to this, but essential—if that's there, we must begin to uncover it, to actually acknowledge that this is something affecting the way we relate to the world. That's the beginning of being able to transform it.

So we need to look at these messages, these habits of mind, if they're there. And I actually think it's helpful to have some sense of how these messages were formed, to have some understanding of the causes and conditions. That's the beginning of the process of transforming them and letting them go. Of course, in meditation it's not therapy, where we need to understand and go into the trauma of five years old and what happened then. It's all about what's happening in the moment. But to see, to whatever extent you feel it's skillful or helpful, the causes and conditions that led to the way you hold yourself now.

The Buddha often talked about this tendency of mind. In Pali, it's called *māna*—conceit, or comparing. And it includes the obvious ones that we're all familiar with: that we're better than, or we're worse than. But interestingly enough, the Buddha also included in this field even "the same as"—that this too is a comparing and evaluating. It's not letting things just be open the way they are. And it gets very subtle when you include that. "Oh, I'm as good as they are"—it's another form of judging. But the ones we most tend to get caught in are "I'm better than" or "I'm worse than." This is where we spend a lot of time, judging ourselves. And then by extension, we judge others. And because we know we're judging others, of course we have this strong fear, this almost expectation, this projection that they are judging us—and that has a lot of influence on our feeling of self-worth.

As I looked into this, the centrality of this issue and how ubiquitous it seemed to be—both in my own practice, in people I spoke to, and certainly in interviews and conversations with yogis—I just saw how common it was and began reflecting on it. And my own understanding, my own intuition, is that it's very

primal. It's almost an animal kind of nature. It wasn't that long ago in evolutionary terms that we had to decide—so quite a while ago, but in evolutionary terms, hundreds of thousands of years ago—we had to decide as animals: do I eat it, or does it eat me? When we met someone new... you see this in wild animals, that's how they relate.

And I read this fascinating book by Jared Diamond called *Guns, Germs, and Steel* that traces the evolution of civilization and why different cultures and civilizations evolved the way they did. He says many interesting things, but one that struck me was this: it's not that long ago—even shorter in evolutionary terms, just a number of thousands of years—that we as humans lived in this way. If we met a stranger, our immediate response had to be: is it friend or foe?

He talks about cultures that had very codified, ritualized ways of coming together to ascertain whether this was someone they were related to, and therefore shouldn't kill, or whether this was a stranger, in which case it was up for grabs. This is still somewhat hardwired in us. Hopefully we've moved quite a way beyond that, but this need to evaluate where I stand in relationship to another when I meet them remains deeply embedded. We can see how this judging tendency emerges from that primal response—an aspect of evolution we still carry around with us.

There's also something that gets distorted as societies change. If you look at tribal societies, how humans evolved for hundreds of thousands of years, we all lived together in tribes and groups where everyone had pretty much access to the same things. We made our houses out of the same materials. We ate the same kind of food. Then as civilization so-called evolved, there was more separation. We've gotten to a point now where there are enormous differences in how people live their lives. In our culture particularly, there's an emphasis on being different, on specializing. Whereas there wasn't much to compare ourselves to in the old days—we were all pretty much the same—now there are endless iterations of how we can look, who we should be, what we should do in the world.

You just have to look at the world of specialist magazines, which I wasn't even aware of until I worked in publishing, and this evolved since I was in that field many years ago. I have a friend whose business is publishing specialized magazines, and there are magazines about knitting hats, or about big tractors, or twenty different types of magazines on different kinds of fishing—all of the ways we've gotten into these niches. From that, we look out at the world and feel different or special or superior or inferior. Within the realm of people living their lives, the Martha Stewarts of this world put out examples of what a Thanksgiving should look like. Has anyone ever had one of those Thanksgivings that Martha Stewart says is possible? I don't know of anyone. But all of these different ways we can compare ourselves—it used to be just our family or our friends or our village. Now we turn on the television and compare ourselves with someone in Italy or in Africa. The possibilities for proliferation around comparing are endless.

Put these two dynamics together and I began to understand why we have this insistent urge to compare, why there are so many ways this tendency manifests.

I have a Tibetan teacher, Tsoknyi Rinpoche, who is very wise and grew up in a culture where he was really loved as a child, with a sense of acceptance, living in a simpler culture where people had access to the same things. He's had to go through the same learning that many teachers from Asia have—trying to understand the Western mind, especially this tendency toward self-hatred. He's come to call it the disease of the West. He said, "In Tibet, we don't know this so much, but I really see what a challenge it is for people here." And he added, "This disease is proliferating. As I travel to the more westernized Asian countries like Taiwan or Singapore, I see it now in the youth there. They're also having this sense of not being good enough, this comparing."

So it's really something we've learned in a way—this distortion of it. The tendency or impulse is there, but somehow it's gotten distorted.

To investigate this further, I did a workshop with Byron Brown, who wrote the book *Soul Without Shame*. He's a student of A.H. Almaas, who founded the Ridhwan School, which offers a wonderful set of teachings and philosophies with real wisdom. In this workshop, Byron talked about the judge—how it came into being, what was the genesis of it. He explained that as children we had to learn social norms to get along, to develop a conscience. But as this process became internalized, it can become overactive and overcritical. This voice that originally is just the conscience becomes the judge, the critic of everything we experience. We can come to see how, as adults, this voice is perhaps not so helpful for us. It actually limits us because the basic message of the judge becomes: I'm not good enough. And here's the kicker: people won't like me just as I am. It can follow that by kicking you when you're down: you'll never change, you haven't got what it takes to change.

He goes on to say in the book that the judge serves many functions. It is a conscience that helps you distinguish right from wrong. It is a motivator to push and persuade you to act in your life. It is a guard that stops inappropriate feelings and behavior. It is a counselor for support in making decisions. It is a guide that provides direction as you make your way. It is an authority figure offering recognition and approval.

It is a yardstick for measuring your progress. And last, it is a mirror that reflects back to you who you think you are.

Each person needs help in these ways. What you were not taught while growing up was how to discover the true source of these functions in yourself. Your true nature has the potential to meet all these needs, but only if the qualities necessary to do that are recognized as existing in you, fulfilling these roles.

When you were a young child, it was important that parents or responsible adults were there to fulfill these roles. As you grew up and became responsible for yourself, you had to find ways to meet these needs on your own. Unfortunately, you got little if any support in recognizing and developing your own inherent capacities. You had little choice but to internalize your parental role models in the form of the judge.

You may not be happy with the way it performs these important functions, but you are familiar with the judge and you know that it is dependable and will always be there for you. Lest we forget, the judge is not bad or evil or even useless. None of us would have survived into adulthood without a judge. Our society would not be as civilized as it is without the judge's constant presence. Each of us will need a judge until we find a source of effortless functioning, direct knowing, and objective conscience inside ourselves. In the meantime, the judge is all most people have to get the job done. However, it is also mechanical, restrictive, inefficient, and insensitive. It does a poor job of supporting the life of the spirit.

So it's really a call to begin this process of working skillfully with the judge, because we see how much it limits our capacity to open to the world and to the fullness of our experience.

In this workshop that I did with Byron Brown, one of the interesting things he had us do was ask the question: How does the judge serve us? What's right about judging? We had to ask it in the form of a repeating question, which many of you know and probably would run a mile if I said we were about to do one as a practice. But they can be quite helpful to uncover unconscious beliefs that we hold. So we had to spend ten minutes just answering that question: What's right about judging?

I actually found it really illuminating. And again, not to encourage you to do a lot of thinking about this, but if you find you're stuck in this pattern, just hold this question and see what comes up for you. What's right about judging? How does the judge serve us?

Often what happens is that it did serve us at some point in our lives, but we've really outgrown it. The habit is so strong, though, that we're still caught in it. But it can be all sorts of beliefs—like, well, at least we feel we know what's right. It can feel like a form of wisdom, and so we feel kind of justified in it. It can give us a sense of safety or control. It can make us feel that we can stay out of trouble if we listen to the judge, because it's so constricting and narrowing. We won't try anything new or experimental, all kinds of things like that.

When we judge others negatively, the same process applies. What's right about that? What do we get out of that? What I often say about the judging voice is that there's always some kind of hook in it that has some semblance of pleasure, some way it's fulfilling some need for us. Pleasure maybe is too strong a word, but some degree of satisfaction or rightness about this process. So when we judge others, we might feel superior, and that has a sense of gratifying the ego. Or perhaps we don't have to look at places where we feel inadequate—just push that aside. We can feel safe in that sense of separation. "Oh, I'm not like them. Look at them over there," and feel good about that.

An interesting one is when we judge others as better than ourselves. What do we get out of that? Why do we persist in doing that? There's usually something buried in there that's satisfying for us. When I look for myself and see myself doing that, I can see that in that sense of diminishing myself, there's a safety—I then don't have to go out into the world and reveal myself. Try something different. Experiment. Be a little bold or creative. I can stay in the safety of the rut that I've assigned myself. So it's just that fear.

And judging ourselves negatively, in the same way—what's beneficial? Why do we like to do that? And you'll all have different answers.

These are just some that I've seen in myself and in talking to others. It can reinforce the sense we have of ourselves as being unworthy. And even though what's being reinforced is a sense of unworthiness, the fact that it's agreeing with a view that we have is satisfying because it doesn't disrupt this view. We're holding on to the view. Perhaps it's reinforcing an internalized message that we've picked up from society or from our family about who we are.

I remember so vividly on one retreat I was teaching, there was a yogi who was perennially late for everything—late into the dhamma hall, late for talks, late for interviews, late for his yogi jobs. We'd hear about it from the cooks: what is it with this guy? We would talk to him about it, and he'd say, yes, yes, I know, it's a pattern, I'm really working with it. And he'd continue to be late. But he came in one day, and I could tell something had shifted.

He said he had just seen for himself the deep-rooted cause of this pattern of lateness. Throughout his life, he said, people were constantly angry with him for being late. His children were so fed up and frustrated with him. His relationships had even fallen apart over this. And he looked and he saw why he did it. He said what it does is that when people get angry with me, it reinforces the sense I have of being unworthy, and so I feel validated in that. This perpetuated his unconscious lateness everywhere because it validated the sense he had that he was unworthy. He would go, yep, you're right, I'm a terrible person, I'm always late. And as distorted as that was, it gave him some satisfaction of validation.

So it can operate on all these different levels. We're often not even aware of how these judgments, these views, are influencing us—how our worldview is so much a part of our inner landscape that we can't see it. We're just seeing the world through these views. We're lost in them, so identified. And what happens is we think they're observations, not judgments. It's just the way things are. This is what I'm like, or this is what those people are like. I'm just seeing things clearly for once. It is like this. The world is like this. We think because we think something, it must be true.

There's another New Yorker cartoon: a man talking to a woman saying, "Can't I ever be critical without being accused of criticizing?" There's a way in which we're thinking, I'm just saying it like it is. It's not being critical of you; it's just the way things are. And we can lose touch with the impact of our thoughts and our words and our deeds on ourselves and on others because it's just the way things are. This is the truth of things.

Sometimes we can feel lost if we don't have this sense of knowing really clearly what's right and what's wrong, who's in and who's out, what's good and what's bad. In that unsureness, we latch on to anything. We'd rather have a really painful judgment than be in that place of not knowing. So we latch on to our views and opinions. We begin to see how that's more comfortable than perhaps feeling into a situation, opening to another's experience, trying to see what someone else might be experiencing.

It's important that we actually use our practice to work with this inner voice of the critic—not to see it as something we need to rush through or get rid of so we can then begin to meditate, then begin our spiritual practice. An important way our mindfulness can help us in this is that we can simply see judgments for what they are. They're just another thought in the mind. They're just another string of words. If we recognize them as that, just like any other thought we've recognized, we see in that recognition the impermanence of it, the transparency of it. We often have the experience of it just kind of disappearing. It doesn't have to have a ripple. It doesn't have to condition our worldview. It doesn't have to shift our view of ourselves. If we believe it, of course, it all tumbles out from that.

As we continue our practice, as we develop faith in our capacity to open, we have our experiences of connecting with the truth of things. We begin to value those experiences, this direct connection with reality, more and more. This becomes our reference point rather than the inner voice of negativity. And this wisdom, this connection, tells us that we are inherently whole and that there is a goodness there inside of us, a worthwhileness, a beauty.

We've all touched those places—that sense of appreciation or stillness or calm. That's what's there without the inner critic. If you've even just had a few moments of that judge being silenced for a while, it's such a huge difference to see that that's possible, that we can actually live without that inner voice of condemnation and cruelty and negativity. We need to learn to trust that experience more than all these conditioned views that we've picked up over our lifetime.

To trust that direct connection with the stillness, with the goodness, with the beauty that is there inside of all of us.

Again, Byron Brown says: "The only real alternative to self-judgment is knowing the truth about who you are. If you have a deep belief that you are worthless, you must discover where that belief came from and why you believe it to be true. Once you know deep inside you, with a direct and felt sense, that you have inherent value and are fully acceptable to yourself, then you will free yourself from the need for positive judgment and approval from others and from your own judge."

So we free ourselves from this negative sense of the judge and also free ourselves from always looking for and needing reinforcement from others—only valuing ourselves if we feel that others are valuing us—finding that sense of independence.

I've had many experiences of working with this judge in practice, but one that's particularly vivid to me revolves around this area. I was practicing on retreat here a number of years ago—actually a metta retreat—and I came on the retreat with some trepidation because I'd held metta at arm's length for many years, beginning by saying, "What a load of hogwash. Who wants to do that? Go around babbling about happiness and safety." It just seemed so pie in the sky and unrealistic and kind of hokey.

And when I looked a little closer at what was going on, I saw it was my fear that I couldn't actually move

to that place that could love and accept myself, could actually express love to others. I realized that I really needed to challenge that view of myself and see what this practice could do, but I wasn't sure if I could.

So I began the practice, and in some ways it was going okay. My concentration was deepening and there weren't a lot of hindrances, but there wasn't a huge amount of metta. I had this idea of what it should look like—the ideal of golden light and an open heart and unconditional love—and it didn't look like that. It was just kind of warm and friendly, but that was about it.

I went in to see my teacher, who very kindly gave some mild adjustment to my practice. "Why don't you try this for a while?" But being who I was, and coming in with a sense of doubt about my own practice and ability, I took that one little line—and in between being in the interview room and by the time I got down to my walking path near the vegetable garden, I had blown it into a full-scale critique of everything I was trying to do and who I was in my practice.

"My teacher thinks it's hopeless. I am hopeless. Why did I ever think I could practice metta? This is the worst decision I've ever made. What can I do? Here I am, another month to go, and I've sublet my house, and I don't have a car." Just that—how can I get out of this horrendous situation of failure? Looking around, thinking everyone knows that I'm just so hopeless, and why did I ever think... I'm sure you know that experience. It was very familiar to me.

But as I walked down to my path—even probably just standing there—I really had the sense, this clear image, that I was on the edge of an abyss. The metaphor was so strong to me. And the grace or the insight that came, both out of my practice and probably from having done two weeks of metta, was that I had a choice. It was so clear that I could choose to just take that next step and go down into that well of poor me, failure, hopeless, never change—all of those kinds of sentiments. I said to myself, it was very familiar. It would just take a little push and over I would go into that. I could dwell in there.

But what I thought was, yeah, you could stay there. What would it feel like? Hours? Days? I've got another four weeks. Could be four weeks of being in there.

Two thoughts came. One was that whenever I've been in that space, however difficult it was, somehow or another—through whatever grace or conditions changing or even just time—I came out of it. I found some balance, found some sense of equanimity, compassion, or forgiveness. And the other was: why not just avoid that whole scenario of gloom and doom and horrible, depressing, self-negating hatred and just step over the abyss? Just not go there.

I thought, what would it take to do that, to make that move and not go down there? And the obvious answer that came was: I'd have to accept my experience. This is what my practice looks like. This is who I am. If I could make it any different, I would have. But I can't. This is it.

And as little as that might seem, it wasn't like I then opened to all of that unconditional love that I'd been thinking I should have. But I was able to continue, realizing that if I needed it to be any different, I was

going to suffer, because it wasn't different. It was what it was. I am who I am in that moment. It doesn't mean I couldn't change, but in that moment, that's all I could bring to my practice. And so I just continued, accepting my practice as it was.

And you know, I actually had an amazing retreat—not immediately, and in completely different ways than I had anticipated or expected in my idealized view of the practice. But just accepting who I was and what I was in that moment enabled me to step over that abyss and not go there.

Acceptance really is the heart of this practice of letting go of the judge, to really open to these feelings. And the practice can bring up a lot of old memories. All the bad things you've ever done will be paraded before you in your practice. If it hasn't happened yet, I'm sorry, it probably will at some point. And part of our practice is: can we just feel that very directly, very openly? Let it in. Bring it on, kind of thing. The first thing is just to feel it—all of the fear and anger and sadness and remorse that it might bring up.

Guilt and shame, not so helpful. But remorse can be really useful. Just acknowledging there were things that I did that were unskillful, to myself, to others. And really have that willingness to feel everything. Through that willingness, the acceptance comes in. And from the acceptance, forgiveness and compassion. We did the best that we could. The causes and conditions of our life as it was in those days and those times—we were trying as best we could. We were confused, we were lost, we were hurt, we were frightened. Whatever might have been up, it's really important to just acknowledge that for ourselves and to bring in forgiveness and mettā, to bring in the kindness that acknowledges that.

The next part of working with the judging mind is the acceptance of others. We see, as we look at our inner experience and get a little clearer about what's going on, how much we build our worldview out of our sense of self. And it's often this diminished sense of self that I've been talking about—a little critical, a little fearful. Through that, we view the world and we view others. And that way of seeing limits our ability to really open to others in their fullness, with their difficulties, with their challenges.

We aren't able to fully understand another's experience, to really see that others may be having a very different reality than what we're experiencing. What we're experiencing—the way we're experiencing ourselves or this other person—isn't perhaps what they're experiencing. Just that, in and of itself, is a huge opening to reducing the amount of judging that we go through. We might not always have the correct perception. We might not have an understanding of why someone else is acting the way they are or responding the way they are. We can't know that other person's experience. So just a little bit of "don't know" in there can be so helpful.

One of my recent favorite movies is this New Zealand film called *Whale Rider*. I'm sure some of you saw it. If you haven't, I recommend it. It's about this young Māori girl who lives with her grandfather, who's a leader of their community. He's looking for his successor. His son isn't it, and his granddaughter he just doesn't even consider because she's a girl. She can't be a leader. Even though she exhibits all of these signs of being someone who's really quite special, he just says he has no use for her. It's so heartbreaking. And

she's such an amazing young being in the movie.

It's not until some really amazing, life-changing event happens that he finally gets to see her for who she is and recognizes the leader that she is and can be—even though, you know, in his eyes, she's a girl.

All of us have this constricted view of other people. We see them through this lens of our projections. It's one of the reasons why the Dalai Lama has such an amazing effect on people. And if you ask him, "What is it you do that's so magical? Why do people love you so much?" he says, "I don't do anything special. I just look for what's common between us. I look for what unites us, not what separates us." He says to try to cultivate deep recognition of the equality of all beings, their potential to be free, their right not to suffer—rather than looking for what's different or what separates us.

When we get disconnected though, when we let this narrow view predominate, it brings about the judging. It can lead to this sense of separation, and it can feel very painful. And on retreat, again, through the sensitivity, we can really feel how painful it is when we push others away through that sense of separation.

Part of the practice is being willing to acknowledge how painful it is and not use it as a kind of armoring, because often we really do use the judge as a protection. It's actually the source of a lot of humor—humor that separates, that points to the other and makes fun of them. It's the judge manifesting again. You can see so much humor that does that.

Someone today, we were talking about the judge, and she told me a practice she uses which I thought was very helpful: "Lower your standards and relax." Great teaching. And she said, even if just a little bit, it lets me open to others just as they are. A really skillful thing to do.

What I saw when I looked at the judge is that a big part of this relationship to others is self-righteous indignation. Ever had a taste of that? Self-righteous indignation. It's such a fuel of the judging mind, of the separation that I'm talking about. And you just have to look at these three words: self-righteous indignation. I thought of it as the perfect storm of delusion.

Self—ego, me, I, mine. Righteous—views and opinions, fixed, permanent, "this is the way things are." Indignation—it's just a form of aversion. It's anger masquerading as indignation. We cloak it in self-righteousness to justify our anger. It's the opposite of what the Buddha taught: selflessness, impermanence, non-aversion, compassion. But we're stuck in it. For many of us, it's a refuge.

I found this writer, David Brin—he's a scientist, actually a science fiction writer—who feels that self-righteous indignation is actually a form of addiction, and it's a source of a huge amount of the divisiveness that we're seeing in the world today. This is what he says:

"We all know self-righteous people, and if we're honest, many of us will admit having wallowed in this state ourselves, either occasionally or in frequent rhythm. It is a familiar and rather normal human

condition, supported, even promulgated, by messages in mass media. While there are many drawbacks, self-righteousness can be heady, seductive, and even, well, addictive. Any truly honest person will admit that the state feels good. The pleasure of knowing, with subjective certainty, that you are right and your opponents are deeply, despicably wrong. Sanctimony, or a sense of righteous outrage, can feel so intense and delicious that many people actively seek to return to it again and again. Moreover, researchers have found that this tendency crosses all boundaries of ideologies."

He describes how it's just rife throughout our debates today, the dialogues that we have—this addiction to self-righteous indignation and that sense of strength that comes from it. Just to feel how crazy this is and how separating. What's needed is to deflate all aspects of that triumvirate of delusion that we get lost in.

So we work with the judge by knowing it, by seeing it as thoughts in the mind, seeing it just as it is, feeling the emotions that it brings up—whether it's fear or aversion or indignation, shame or grief, anger—letting ourselves know what's happening.

It's really important to bring humor into this practice. It can feel so painful. We can feel so tight and contracted around the judging mind that to bring some levity in, some acceptance and compassion, is really helpful.

Jack Kornfield recommends—and many of us do—counting your judgments. By the time you get to five hundred, you'll see just how knee-jerk they are, and you have to let go a little bit. You can use little taglines. You notice you're judging, and you can sometimes tell whose voice it is. And you might just say, "Thanks, Auntie Hattie, thanks for your opinion, but I don't need that right now. I'm changing the channel." Whatever works for you.

For me, my tagline came from a practice here on retreat, where I was just so dismayed by the relentlessness of the judge. I tried all these different things. I felt it in the body. I counted them. I knew when they came up. And nothing really stopped them. So I made this vow. My practice was that every time I noticed a judging thought, I would add, "and chipmunks are cute."

And it just shifted the energy, because every time I had a judging thought, I would think of chipmunks. And who cannot like chipmunks? They're just that energy. It's amazing to see how, when I would do that, in shifting the energy, the judging thought was just gone.

So find what works for you. It's going to be different at different times. For me, it was also really helpful to see how I was creating this form of suffering. We were speaking this morning about intention and volition. We do this volitionally. Sure, it arises out of causes and conditions, and it can seem to happen quite spontaneously—that's part of the impersonal nature of it. But as we tune in, unless we begin to work with the causes and conditions, it will keep happening. Once we bring mindfulness to it, we can see that there is a choice we can make about continuing to feed that judge, feed that sense of separation, or incline the mind towards acceptance, peace, or calm—whatever works for you.

Another helpful skillful means is to actually do some metta. If you notice you're judging yourself or others, follow it with a line of metta. May I be happy. May you be happy. May you be safe from judging, free of judging. May I be free of judging. And it can feel insincere at times, when you say it and the energy of the judge is still there. But as my wise friend and elder Carol Wilson says, "Fake metta is better than real aversion."

So just try it. Anything is better than perpetuating the judge. And especially as we begin to see our practice in terms of an unfolding path leading to greater and greater happiness, greater and greater freedom, greater and greater wisdom and compassion—they just don't go together. If this is really our deepest and sincerest wish for ourselves, how can we willingly give energy to this judging mind, this negative, painful pattern, this source of suffering? To really look at it this way, to hold these two possibilities and ask: Which would I choose? Which do I choose for myself? Let that begin to diminish the tendency of moving in that direction.

These thoughts are impermanent. They come and go. We bring the wisdom in, and we practice acceptance. We learn that acceptance is a way we're kind to ourselves, that we actually come more and more into alignment with the truth of things. And this is so simple yet so profound. If we make these choices toward more and more happiness, letting go, freedom, the contrast becomes clearer. The choices become clearer. And this is how we do our practice, and it's how we live our lives.

I want to close with a quote from Marianne Williamson, which is a little flowery, but I think it really speaks to this. She says:

"Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness, that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous? Who are you not to be? Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that others won't feel insecure around you. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It's not just in some of us, it's in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our fear, our presence automatically liberates others."

Let's just sit for a moment.

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