

There Is Nothing Wrong With Us

By Cheri Huber

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If the ways we have been trying to affect change were going to work, they would have by now. If "changing" and "doing" and "improving" worked, we would be a world of perfected beings living in Utopia, and the idea of publishing a book like this would never have occurred to the folks at Conari Press. But that is clearly not our experience of ourselves and the world. The great majority of us are still struggling to become who and what we believe we should be.

Are we really determined to do things differently in the next millennium, or are we going to continue the same tired old ineffective processes, changing only the content to fool ourselves into thinking we are doing something different? Will we continue to try to fix ourselves and the world, or will we find the willingness to sit down and be still long enough to see through the illusion—that anything needs to be fixed? Will we accept that our beliefs, not the world as it is, is causing our suffering? In my experience, there is much to be sad about. But I am well aware that something that makes me sad might thrill someone else. What I see as the senseless death and destruction of war, another sees as just and righteous retaliation. If I believe my view is the correct one, and that those who do not agree are wrong. I am perpetuating the violence just as surely as if I held a gun.

Centuries ago, Zen Master Bunan said, "Die while you are alive and be absolutely dead, then do whatever you want; it's all good." He was talking about dying to our beliefs and assumptions, letting go of our better ideas about how the universe needs to be, and getting really clear that compassion-ate action comes only from being in the present moment, unencumbered by the dictates of conditioned mind.

With these things in mind, I offer the following for your consideration.

We already are that which we are seeking. Every spiritual path tells us this: "That which you are seeking is causing you to seek." "We are God manifest in time and eternity." "For behold, the Kingdom of God is within you." But why is this so hard for us to know? To me, it is because the social conditioning we receive as children teaches us there is something wrong with us, and that to be loved and accepted we must improve ourselves. We start out just how we are, and then we are changed, fixed, punished, and altered until we become someone who is "appropriate" and "acceptable." Then we are able to fit into a family and a society. Miss Manners(!) said, "We are all born charming, fresh, and spontaneous and must be civilized before we are fit to participate in society."

Unless you were raised by wolves, you probably heard at least a few of the following as you were growing up: "Don't do that.... Why don't you ever listen?... Wipe that look off your face.... You shouldn't feel that way.... You should have known better.... You should be ashamed of yourself.... I can't believe you did that.... It serves you right.... What were you thinking of?... The nurses must have dropped you on your head.... I had great hopes for you.... Don't talk back to me.... Do as you are told.... Don't you ever think about anyone else?" Somewhere along the line we conclude there is something wrong with us. What else could we conclude? If there were nothing wrong with us, people would not say

those things, would they?

Being intelligent creatures, we soon take over the job of punishing our-selves, punishment being the way to improve so that we can be who and how we should be. We learn the self-improvement process as quickly as possible so we can fix ourselves before anyone else notices we need fixing. As a result, most people grow up with an unshakable belief that the primary reason they are "good" is that they punish themselves when they are "bad." The very thought of not punishing ourselves when we make mistakes, say and do stupid things, feel inappropriate feelings, or act "bad," makes us nervous: If I don't punish myself when I do something wrong, what will keep me from doing it again? I might do even worse things!

To this I would say that one process does not lead to another. Punishment does not make us good, punishment makes us punishing. Hating and rejecting ourselves in this moment is not good practice for loving and accepting our-selves in another. Goodness is our inherent nature and punishment is what keeps us from knowing that. We are never going to improve ourselves until we become who we "should" be. If self-improvement worked, it would have by now. Punishment is what keeps us from seeing that there is no one who needs to be punished. It is a learned response, it will never work, and we can let go of it if we are willing.

"But, Cheri, how can I do that?" you might ask. "It's so deep and auto-matic, and it feels like the 'good person' thing to do. I say or do or feel some-thing wrong, I beat myself up to ensure I don't do it again. Swift and sure. It's scary to consider not doing it ... but I guess that's part of the conditioning, too, isn't it?"

Yes, it is. Self-improvement, punishment, and self-hate are survival mechanisms and feel like "good person" things to do. Isn't that ironic? Isn't that sad? Yet when we beat ourselves up to improve, we are doing the same thing our parents did to us in childhood (and their parents did to them, and so on down the line—no blame here). Again, it didn't work then to make you the person you believe you should be, and it won't work now. This "Build A Better World Through Hatred" school of thought is doomed to failure from the start.

How can we turn this around? How can we realize that our True Nature is goodness, and that when we stop doing everything else, goodness is what's there? How can we find compassion for all aspects of ourselves? Is there a process that is not just another stab at self-improvement?

In my experience there is a process, the basis of which is meditation. There are other helpful practices and concepts, but meditation brings it all together. Much of the rest of this article describes the process I am talking about, but before going too deeply into that, I want to give some examples of how, as adults, our lack of self-acceptance plays out.

The Bind We Are Caught In

Little in social conditioning and childraising teaches self-acceptance. We have few models for how to be generous with ourselves—in fact, quite the opposite. "Inappropriate" needs, wants, impulses, emotions, attitudes, and beliefs are systematically stripped from us and replaced by whatever the people responsible for our survival believe is best (if we are raised by someone who cares). Even if this is done in gentle ways, we conclude that we are flawed, that our natural responses are wrong and bad. We internalize this searchout-

and-destroy survival system so that we can monitor ourselves and stop inappropriate behavior before it goes too far. As adults we unconsciously carry this around with us, and it is still running our lives. We no longer express "inappropriate needs." We no longer require another person to point out what we are doing wrong; we do that for ourselves. When we do not meet certain standards, we punish, blame, berate, discipline, and abuse ourselves until we are who we "should" be. And if we do not, we feel guilty. We spend our lives either resigned to the fact that there is something wrong with us, feeling hopeless and inadequate, or we spend our lives trying to "fix" ourselves, never quite knowing what is wrong or how to fix it but feeling compelled to keep trying. I call this punishing, blaming process "self-hate."

Two places where many can see how lack of self-acceptance controls their lives are "going on a diet" and "getting regular exercise." Both are often begun as self-hate's response to what it sees in the mirror. And while it might be true that shedding a few pounds and exercising regularly would be a wonderful thing to do for ourselves, beginning a program with self-hate at the helm cannot succeed. Self-hate's job is to hate you; self-rejection's job is to reject you; self-improvement's job is to judge you. We cannot use conditioning to release ourselves from conditioning! You could starve until nearly dead (some have), you could exercise until unable to walk (many have), and still not like what you see in the mirror. With self-hate in control, you will never hear the words, "Good job, goal achieved." It is relentless, and it has us right where it wants us. Self-hate will talk you into dieting and exercising, complain when the going gets hard, dupe you into quitting, and beat you up for having quit. Not pretty, but highly effective at keeping you trapped in its illusion. What is its illusion? The illusion is that it is on your side, that it is the voice of reason and common sense, and that to succeed at life you must listen to it.

The bind we are caught in is trying to end self-hate with self-hate, trying to find self-acceptance through self-rejection, trying to become who we believe we should be by destroying who we are. The really good news is we cannot destroy who we inherently are. The miracle of existence gives us the opportunity to find out who that is.

The How-To of Self-Acceptance

First of all, what is self-acceptance? My answer to this is quite simple though often not easy to realize in our lives. Self-acceptance is allowing ourselves to be exactly as we are without needing to change anything.

"But, Cheri," you might say, "I really, really want to change some things about myself. Are you saying I should just accept those things and not try to make my life any different?"

When I suggest we accept ourselves as we are, people get upset. The belief is that if we just accept, if we don't struggle to change, we will never be different and evil will win out over good. I further suggest that struggle perpetuates the "problem," and that it is really rather arrogant of us to presume that we can control something by not accepting it. Let's say I lock my keys in the car. Now, I can stomp around and curse, kick the door, and call myself names. I can do all sorts of things, but if I don't accept that my keys are indeed locked in the car, I'm not going anywhere. Acceptance doesn't mean I have to like it or approve of it or anything else. In fact, I don't have to have any relationship with it at all. I simply must accept that my keys are locked in the car. Yes, this is the reality, where do I go from here? From this place of acceptance, many possibilities become available to me that might never have done so had I persisted in my conditioned responses.

We need to allow ourselves to be as we are long enough to see who we are. Underneath the conditioning, who are we? Don't you agree that we could risk dropping the hate, judgment, and rejection long enough to experience that? Wouldn't that be worth the risk of running amok?

Here is where meditation practice, or awareness practice, is essential in learning selfacceptance.

Meditation

Zen meditation is the practice of sitting still in the present moment, holding on to nothing, pushing nothing away. As we sit, we make ourselves available to whatever arises. Thoughts and feelings come and go. Sometimes our thoughts wander, and we wake up to find our attention has been a million miles away. When this happens, we gently bring the attention back into the present, back into the body, back to the breath, and begin again.

There are three things I always encourage meditators to do: (1) Pay attention. (2) Believe nothing. (3) Don't take any of it personally. I will explain these further because to me they are the basis of a meditation practice.

Pay attention. Pay attention to everything. Develop what I call "passive awareness." I like to use the example of solar heating to clarify what I mean by passive awareness: The sun warms some type of collector—tiles, stones, barrels of water—and the collector stores the heat. The sun is not trying to heat the collector, and the collector is not trying to store the heat, but together they create solar heating. Each is present, and the transformation happens.

In the same way, if I am practicing passive awareness, I am simply here, aware and present. If, on the other hand, I am busy trying to know what is right or wrong, to be a good meditator, to have deep insights, I have missed the point completely. So if I am practicing passive awareness, I am not trying to accomplish anything. I am simply aware and present, noticing everything that happens—not judging, not solving problems, not making plans to improve.

Here is an example of how passive awareness might work. I hope you apply it to whatever "fault" you are on a self-improvement campaign about. It could be something like cutting back on coffee, engaging in fewer mindnumbing entertainments, eating less, being on time, keeping your temper, meditating more—we all have those pet areas of self-torture being perpetuated under the guise of being a better person. The example: I hate to do the dishes. I put it off for as long as I can, and let everything stack up until it becomes moldy and disgusting. I feel ashamed, guilty, and embarrassed. I know this is a sign of some deep flaw, but life is hard and I don't want to do one more hard thing!

Each time I go into the kitchen the anxiety builds. I decide to bite the bullet and wash those dishes. The voices begin, "Not now. You're too tired. It's been a long day. You deserve to relax. Why are you so compulsive? You can do the dishes later. All you do is work. Go see what's on TV and just relax." Later, as I'm brushing my teeth, a little voice says, "You didn't do the dishes. Again. You know you said you were going to. Now they're going to be awful tomorrow and you won't do them then either." I look myself in the eye in the mirror and say, "No! I'm sick of this. I am going in there right now and do those dishes." On the way to the kitchen I remember I promised to call my sister. "Is it

too late? No, I'll only talk for a minute." A half-hour later I'm getting into bed and the little voice says, "You forgot to do the dishes." My heart sinks, I plunge into despair. "Oh, it's okay," comforts the little voice, "you can do them tomorrow."

After having exasperating scenes like this play out over and over with a variety of subjects, I begin to suspect there is more to this than meets the eye. I want to know experientially, not intellectually, what is going on here. I begin to practice compassionate, passive awareness, paying attention, believing nothing, and taking none of it personally. So, with passive awareness added to the mix, I eat a meal and watch very closely how I avoid washing the dishes afterward. "I'm too tired. It would ruin the meal to have to clean up right now. I'll do it later." I listen to what the voices tell me as I don't do the dishes. "You really should do them now. You won't do them later. You are a lazy slob and you always will be." I notice how I feel when the voices are talking to me and I'm caught in this "I should do the dishes/I'm not doing the dishes" duality. I begin to feel the toll it takes on me physically, emotionally, spiritually, and mentally. I observe that I feel defeated and depressed.

As I practice, I realize that if this were only a matter of doing the dishes, they could be done in no time. But this is not about doing the dishes. It's about keeping me in prison. All my time, energy, attention, and awareness are locked up in "Will I wash the dishes and be a good person, or will I not and be a bad person?" If doing the dishes *didn't make me a good person*, and not doing the dishes *didn't make me a bad person*, what would I do about the dishes?

This is where spiritual practice, awareness practice, begins. Spiritual practice does not begin until the beatings have stopped. If I become aware of something about myself that I don't like, and I beat myself up for it, I am once again using the old childhood system of conditioning. The missing element is compassionate self-acceptance.

Believe nothing. All thoughts, images, and impressions are filtered through conditioning and are after-the-fact interpretations of events. For example, we have made connections in our minds between certain situations and a set of physical sensations we label "stress." When we encounter these situations and feel these sensations, our automatic response is to believe that, yes, in fact, this is stressful. As we sit in meditation, we begin to notice that when we feel this we have that thought, and it triggers that emotion which in turn leads to this action. This is all learned, inauthentic, and devilishly seductive. Do not believe it. Question every sensation-thought-emotion-action sequence that goes through your mind and body. Is anything inherently stressful, or is stress something we add? Do this with literally everything. In the dishwashing example, as you pay attention, you hear the same words but you don't believe they are true about you or about the situation. "But, Cheri, don't some situations call for certain responses? If a tiger is chasing me, for example, shouldn't I be afraid?"

No, it is all learned. Examine fear and you will discover nothing more than a set of sensations, thoughts, emotions, and actions, all of which you have learned to associate. But don't believe me, find out for yourself.

Don't take any of it personally. The universe is not personal. For "personal" to exist, there would have to be something separate from all that is, and there is not. The feeling we humans have that we exist apart and separate from everything else is an illusion, a trick of the mind. There is nothing wrong with that, it is just that being caught in the illusion of a separate self makes us feel alone, afraid, and insecure. Believing we are separate (in Christian terms, believing we are out of the presence of God) is the source of our desperate desire to control life. Trying to control life—hold on to this, get rid of that—is

the cause of suffering.

As we sit in meditation, we see all kinds of things about ourselves. Some we like; some we do not. The practice is to watch from the "center," our core of wisdom and compassion where nothing is taken personally. If we see something about ourselves we do not like, our attitude is, "Ah, judgment"; if we see something we are proud of, "Ah, pride"; if we become confused, "Ah, confusion." In this way we grow accustomed to watching conditioning instead of identifying with it, which is a giant step toward self-acceptance and freedom. From this greater perspective, we might ask all sorts of questions, such as, Who (which aspect of the personality) makes decisions about what needs to change? Where does that part get its information? Does the part who is being required to change agree? Has trying to change in this way ever worked, and if so, at what cost?

This nonjudgmental questioning allows the parts of us who have felt so threatened feel safer, and they begin to relax a little. We have created a safe place for all the aspects of who we are. Compassion has turned inward, and the joyous work of self-acceptance has begun.

In Zen meditation practice, all that is happening is that we are sitting there facing a blank white wall. We notice all the drama we are capable of acting out with others is being acted out with no one but ourselves and that white wall. Everything we feel, think, and do in all sorts of situations in daily life, we do while sitting there on the cushion. No one else is required for conditioning to be triggered, just ourselves. We just sit there and it all arises ... and begins to fall apart. The mind is a fascinating thing right up until we notice how repetitive it is. Our issues are "real" and "true" right up until we notice how arbitrary they are. The trap we are caught in is inescapable right up until we notice we have the keys.

For meditation to make a difference, we must do it. Reading or listening to someone talk about it will do little if anything to make it real, but, as with diet and exercise, we cannot approach it as a "should." If we do, self-hate will quickly talk us out of our practice. Self-hate's power lies in its covert activities. It requires darkness. When we begin to shine the light of compassionate awareness on our inner workings and begin to see that blindly following conditioning robs us of our lives, self-hate starts to unravel. It does not want to unravel, and it knows it cannot stand up under scrutiny. It is a false overlay keeping us from seeing that we already are everything we seek. So if beginning a meditation practice is another attempt at self-improvement, if it is not our heart's deepest desire (and, often, even if it is), we can expect self-hate to do its worst.

Other Helpful Practices

In pursuing the work of self-acceptance, there are many helpful practices. *Treat yourself as if you were someone you love.* Think of a person or a pet you hold dear. Imagine that this dear one is having a problem and needs your help. How would you respond? Feel the caring and generosity you have for this being. Now give that to yourself. (That voice in your head telling you this is self-indulgent is the voice of self-hate. Don't believe it!)

Focus on your breath. When you become aware of an urgent, judgmental, stressful, fearful, hateful thought or situation, simply bring your attention to your breathing. This practice can very quickly bring us up against a mountain of resistance. Our self-hate—our belief that we are inadequate, that we must control life—goes berserk when we begin to

practice dropping whatever urgent, stressful, life-and-death thing has us in its clutches today. "That's crazy! That's just flatout irresponsible! Everything is going to fall apart around me if I don't keep my mind on what needs to be done." Focusing on the breath brings up our deeply held belief that we make life happen, and that we must be tense in the process. But if we are resolute in the face of this fear, if we maintain the practice of bringing the attention back to the breath even though the voices in our heads are screaming, we begin to see that nothing bad happens. Our lives don't fall apart, no one dies, we don't lose our jobs—nothing happens except the urgency of egocentric conditioning begins to be less believable. We begin to be free of the tyrant who runs our lives, the taskmaster who cracks a whip over our heads.

Notice self-hate. People say to me that the term self-hate seems extreme. "But Cheri," they say, "I don't exactly hate myself. Disapprove sometimes, maybe, but not hate." To know that "self-hate" is not an overstatement, attune very closely to how you talk to yourself when you don't meet your standards. Notice the choice of words, the tone of voice, and the undercurrent of judgment. Notice how often you don't meet your standards. Notice how seldom, if ever, you do meet your standards and how short-lived the satisfaction is. Notice how your standards constantly change, how the ante is always upped just before you begin to feel really successful. Do this for a week. The awareness may change your life.

Challenge yourself. Enjoy doing something you currently believe you can't enjoy—not to change, not to improve, but to see through the beliefs and assumptions that control your life. Learn to enjoy doing the dishes, spending time with your mother-in-law, commuting in rush hour traffic, or eating healthy foods. Do this, not because it will make you a better person, but because it will help you be free of the conditioning that says you can't possibly enjoy those things.

Stop watching television. I compare sitting in front of a television to being hooked up to an intravenous infusion of toxic waste. Madison Avenue knows that if it can make us feel inadequate, which it can, it will have us in its back pocket, which it does. The thin, savvy, beautiful people have the world by the tail. Are you one of them? No? Buy this product, act this way, do this thing, feel this feeling, and you will be. The obvious message is that how you are now could be improved. The not so obvious message is being thin, savvy, etc. makes you right, and being anything else makes you wrong.

Watch your projections. "Projection" is the notion that everything mirrors who we are. We always see ourselves when we look out at the world and other people. It is not possible to see something that is not a part of ourselves.

When sitting in meditation and facing a blank white wall, it is relatively easy to see projection at work. As stated earlier, everything we do in our lives we do while just sitting there. With no one else participating, it becomes clear that we are seeing ourselves. In daily life, recognizing projection is not as easy, there are so many distractions, but it is no less revealing than seeing it in meditation. Accepting that what we see is who we are is, to me, the most powerful tool for awareness practice.

Discover your "identities." A helpful construct to consider in developing self-awareness is that of "identities." Identities are the various parts of ourselves, the different roles we play as we go through the day. The terms roles, personae, and subpersonalities are often used to point to the same thing.

In Zen it is said that we live in the world of duality. Simply put, this means that everything has an opposite. Up/down, good/bad, right/wrong are examples of pairs of opposites. One cannot exist without the other. Most identities also exist in inseparable

pairs. Examples of pairs of identities are miser/spendthrift; athlete/couch potato; devoted spouse-parent-family member/desperate individualist. Sometimes we are identified with one side of a pair, sometimes with the other. Our conditioned belief that we must be consistent is challenged by this. This is confusing, a problem to be solved, an improvement to be made. "I can't be changing my mind like this all the time. I have to make a decision and stick with it. That's how strong, capable people operate." Conditioning, self-hate, self-improvement kicks in and goes on its campaign to get rid of the side it judges to be the wrong one. You can see the futility of this.

The practice of noticing our identities, and how we move back and forth between them, gives us enormous freedom. Not identifying with either side— in fact, disidentifying—and observing from a larger perspective, brings us to an awareness of how the world of duality works. Once we see that of course we are inconsistent, and that we will never hate one side out of existence, we can relax and stop trying to improve. Accepting that we are sometimes this, sometimes that, is the only change we need.

Learn to disidentify. Disidentification is the action of "stepping back" from whatever identity we are in and viewing ourselves from a larger perspective. Almost all of us know the experience of suddenly realizing we are no longer caught up in the drama of a situation but are observing it and ourselves from a place that feels "outside" or "above" what is going on. With practice we can learn to do this at will. Why? Disidentification enables us to begin to see the universality of experience. When we see that we are one of six billion people, that we all have our "stuff," and that we are all trying to get the best deal for ourselves (in Zen, "seeking better accommodation"), we can begin to take our own stuff less personally. We see ourselves caught in the illusion of separation, struggling and suffering, and we can have compassion.

Write it all down. Write down every judgment, of yourself or anyone else, you hear go through your head. Get them outside of you. Expose them to the light of day. Many people tell me they are afraid doing this will make the "horrible things" they judge themselves for more powerful and real. I tell them no, the power of these judgments lies in their covert operations. They whisper a self-hating thought in your ear just beneath the level of conscious awareness, stir an emotional response, and you are caught in the illusion once again. It never occurs to us to question this conditioning. So when we practice writing down everything it says, every time it says it, we begin to take back the power it has had since we were children. We discover its repetitious nature is rather boring. We begin to take it less personally.

There is nothing wrong with us. We are the loved and loving beings we seek to be. But don't take my word for it; don't believe it because I say so. Begin, or continue, the practice of aware self-acceptance and experience it, know it, for yourself. Meditation and awareness are simple because they don't require fancy techniques or expensive equipment. They are difficult because they require the willingness to challenge a lifetime of conditioning. They are powerful and transforming, changing us through compassionate acceptance of what is.

(This article is from *Fabric of the Future: Women Visionaries Illuminate the Path to Tomorrow*. For information about the book and how to order, please visit the Zen Center's site (www.thezencenter.org/fabric.html))

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