

HOW A NON-JUDGEMENTAL MIND CONNECTS & TRANSFORM US

When you first start to meditate, the first thing you discover (if you haven't already) is the fact that you have a 'voice' in your head. Not only do you have a voice in the head, but a voice that never stops. It talks incessantly, from the moment you wake up to the time you go to sleep (and for some of us it won't even stop then!).

This voice, very often, isn't very helpful. It commentates on our lives all day long. It speculates. It likes and dislikes. It makes judgements about everything (he is, she is, I am, life is...). It labels things. It complains. It compares us to everybody else. It worries about and plans for the future. It constantly replays and regrets the past. It makes up stories about our lives, which often don't represent our reality at all. It does all of this quickly and automatically, so judgements about all that we encounter can quickly become habitual, even automatic. Often, we're not even aware we're doing it, but this unyielding flow of judgemental thoughts makes it difficult to find any peace within ourselves.

The Problem With Automatic Judgements

The great majority of these stories and judgements that the mind makes up are what I would call 'snap judgements'. They're a quick, reflexive assessment of reality, of what's happening. And therefore, many of them are incomplete and inaccurate. Some are unconstructive, and many of them can generate negativity, stress and even deeper forms of suffering. The Buddha once said that our own worst enemy could never harm us as much as our own unwise thoughts, and this feels very true when we look at the suffering our thoughts can cause us.

How Judgemental Thinking Creates Suffering

Imagine you're lying in bed one morning. You wake up, you open your eyes and look out the window, and you see that it's raining. And then the voice in the head comes in and makes a quick snap judgement, such as 'what a dreadful day'. Now, is it true that the day is dreadful? No, it just happens to be raining. That's the reality of what's happening. But if the mind comes in and says that it's a dreadful day *and you believe it*, then guess what you get to have? That's right, you get to have a dreadful day. So a thought like this creates negativity. In other words, you haven't recognised the difference between thoughts and reality so you play the thought out and you suffer.

Too often, we let our thinking and beliefs about what we 'know' prevent us from seeing things as they really are. We fill our minds with preconceived notions, biases, opinions and judgements. When our minds are full like this, we can no longer let any new wisdom or understanding emerge. When we think we know everything already, we hamper our ability to see clearly and to grow and learn.

We can so easily view people, events and the world around us through a veil of preconceived snap judgements. Maybe you have an opinion about someone and you 'put them in a box', as the saying goes. 'She's a hippy', 'he's arrogant', 'she's smart', 'he's weird' – but if we hold onto these mental labels, thinking we 'know' someone through these judgements, you know what happens? We never truly meet them again.

If you pay attention to the thoughts that dart in and out of your mind all day, you might be surprised at just how often you pass judgement about things, events, people...and yourself. Mindfulness involves becoming aware of the mind's habit of judging and unhooking from the thoughts. In this way we learn to not take the thoughts so seriously and to see them as simply mental events. We discover a 'liberating insight', that thoughts are just thoughts, not reality. With this insight, thoughts lose their hold over us.

By responding non-judgmentally to the events and experiences of our lives, we cultivate the capacity to be non-reactive. We're more able to stay grounded in peace, wisdom and presence no matter what life throws at us.

By observing things and people through the lens of non-judgement we see them with 'fresh eyes' – rather than make assumptions about them – it reconnects us with our innermost selves. We begin to see clearly that our thoughts are not reality. A rainy day isn't a dreadful day – it is just a rainy day.

Reality is what's left when all your judgements and assumptions have gone.

Why Our Mind Evolved To Judge & Make Meaning

Why does our mind do all the judging anyway? And why does it jump so quickly to conclusions about what's happening around us? Why does it resort to these snap judgements and start attaching (often unhelpful) stories to our experiences? As with so many unhelpful things that the mind inadvertently does, it is only acting to keep you alive and safe – it has evolved to protect and serve you. Think of the mind as a survival machine.

To keep you alive, your mind takes in masses of sensory data in any given moment and it has to filter it all to highlight what is most relevant. To do this the mind's 'filter' constantly is asking these two basic questions:

What does it mean?

What do I do?

Your mind wants to understand exactly what's happening in your environment. 'What does it mean?' can also sound like 'what is it?' – your mind wants to make any unknowns concrete and understood, so that it knows you will be safe. It also wants you to react as quickly as possible to what you're seeing, feeling and hearing. When it asks 'what do I do?' – it's assessing whether you need to run, fight or hide or whether you are ok and safe.

When your mind is making meanings and judgements about the things around you – what they mean, and what you should do – it wants to know what's happening as quickly as possible: speed beats accuracy every time! That's why the judgments it makes are best described as 'snap judgements'. They are fast but not necessarily accurate. After all, a delayed response could have been the difference between life and death in our ancestors' times if a wolf was in the woods!

However, a wolf on your tail is not very likely in today's world, where you're often very safe. Instead, try imagining this more likely scenario. You're in a car park with your bags of groceries, heading towards your car, and just as you're stepping out from between two cars, another car comes rushing past, nearly hitting you as you

step out. It could have knocked you over, but you remain unscathed and the car cruises on, way too fast. Your body floods with adrenaline – you nearly got hit by that car!

Your mind takes a quick snapshot of what's going on, scrambling to understand and make meaning out of what's just happened. It notices two things: the car is a sleek, shiny convertible, and the woman's reflection in the rear-view mirror reveals that she has designer sunglasses and salon-perfect hair. Immediately, the mind reacts with the thought 'Rich bitch!' This snap judgement is typical of our instinctive minds. The trouble is, it's easy to then start to believe in that snap judgement and allow it to influence your thoughts about people. Maybe you see other people with designer sunglasses or a sleek, stylish car, and you feel animosity towards them. When that happens we can no longer really 'see' the human being beyond their sunglasses or the car they drive.

These snap judgements have the capacity to colour our experience of the world in a powerful way and skew our perceptions, but we can untangle ourselves through the power of mindfulness and kindness.

Adopting The Beginner's Mind

A great way to unhook from the judgmental tendencies of the mind is to cultivate a 'beginner's mind'. What do I mean by that? A beginner's mind is simply a mind that suspends judgements.

A beginner's mind is open and receptive, willing to experience everything as if it were the first time. It doesn't condemn or assume it already knows better. The beginner's mind experiences life with an open mind, free of any expectations of what it 'should' be.

This way of being reconnects us with this fresh way of seeing and unlocks our ability to be truly present for the precious moments of our lives – and the people we love. Next time you find yourself wanting to judge what someone is telling you, listen carefully and perhaps try thinking to yourself, 'Hmmmmmm, isn't that interesting?' If you open your mind to the opportunity to learn something new, you may surprise yourself with the things you discover!

This is where your beginner's mind can really help you to let go of your snap judgements – about the people, places and events in your life. When you meet reality moment by moment, you put aside your attachment to these judgemental views and adopt the openness of a beginner's mind.

The Beginners Mind Is Kind

Kindness is another aspect of the beginner's mind. There is a warmth and openness to experience. A befriending of life in each moment. And this kindness doesn't just apply to how we see others – in fact, we often save the harshest criticism for ourselves.

The voice in our head often has plenty to say to us about how much more we need to do in life to be 'enough'. It often berates us with thoughts like, 'You can't do this!', 'You're an idiot!', 'Who do you think you are?' It is quite willing to loudly apply these

negative criticisms of us in its misguided – though well-intentioned – efforts to help us thrive in life.

In mindfulness training we learn to adopt the kindness and calm of the beginner's mind and observe these mental judgements that cause us suffering and stress. We meet them with kindness and understanding, knowing that the mind is only doing what it knows to do to try to keep us alive – and untangle from them.

In training in this way we become better equipped to be kind to ourselves, we also become better able to offer genuine kindness, friendship and love to others. If we can be less harsh, impatient and judgemental with ourselves, we will be more kind, patient and non-judgemental with ourselves and others in life in general. We can become islands of sanity, peace and kindness in a frantic world.

In this way, a non-judgemental mind connects and transforms us all. Like anything in life, cultivating a kind and compassionate and calm mind takes a bit of practice. Meditation is a great way to take the next steps towards cultivating a kinder, more compassionate mind and an authentic wholehearted love of life. After all, in the words of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, "What is love? Love is the absence of judgement".

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