

We're continuing our theme of mindfulness and relationships, how there is a trajectory of practice, moving from contentious mind to consenting mind to contented mind. That conscious, compassionate connection is how we move through that trajectory. Under contentious mind we're exploring three flavors: comparing mind, which can tip into complaining mind, critical mind, which can tip into controlling or contempt, and contentious mind itself, which can tip into conflict.

This week's focus is on critical mind – the processing of the mind familiar to all of us of responding to a sense of something is not right, something is off or wrong, with judgment, criticism, shoulding on one's self or on others, shaming-blaming, getting locked into a position of right and wrong and losing flexibility and openness, contracting in judgment rather than compassionately understanding and forgiving, let alone learning from and even celebrating our mistakes or someone else's as opportunities to practice, to heal and awaken.

As I did last week with comparing mind, I want to suggest some positive benefits to critical mind, because we are hard-wired to notice when something is off, to know viscerally when something is wholesome and when it is unwholesome, and we certainly are conditioned to a body of values about what is virtuous and what is not.

Critical mind begins deep in the brain, early in the brain. From early, early on, as our brains develop and mature, an essential part of processing and responding to experience is to notice patterns, and to create patterns of expectation around those patterns. I smile and you smile back. I try that again, and you smile back again. I'm learning to expect a smile back from you whenever I smile. That's what brains do; that's how minds learn. We come to expect if we do this – smile - that will happen – a smile back. We come to expect that this gesture (raised hand) means hello, or stop, or I'm going to hit you. When our expectations are met, that learning is reinforced by the release of dopamine, the neurotransmitter of pleasure and reward. Our bodies feel good when our expectations are met; we are safe in a predictable world; we learn to keep going in that direction. Or at least we know we're not safe in an unpredictable world and we have to learn how to protect ourselves in a good direction then.

When our expectations are not met, or we realize we've not met the expectations of someone else, our body goes through a little startle or jolt, something's off here, the pattern isn't matching, what's wrong? This jolt interrupts the release of dopamine; we don't get that hit of ahhhh. This is how the brain knows to self-correct; this is how the mind learns.

Our brains can't not do this. A break in the pattern – a jolt of – that's not right; that's not what I expected. We can learn to react to that startle or jolt with openness and curiosity – what just happened? What do I need to pay attention to here? What can I learn? We can practice not clinging to our expectations being met and learn to practice what's next? I wrote about this in the most recent e-newsletter – Accommodating Zebras. You can sign up to receive the newsletter on the sign-up sheet out on the table in the lobby or download it from the archives on my website.

The ultimate in practice would be the teachings of the Third Zen Patriarch: the Way is effortless for one who has no preferences. Or another teaching from him: to practice being non-anxious with non-perfection. There's the teaching story of the Chinese farmer and the horse: A Chinese farmer has a horse; his neighbor comes over to visit and exclaims, "Oh, how fortunate that you have a horse!" The Chinese farmer non-committally says, "We'll see."

The next day the horse runs away. The neighbor comes over to offer his sympathy. "Oh, how unfortunate that you've lost your horse." The Chinese farmer again says non-committally, "We'll see."

The next day the horse returns to the farmer, bringing a new mare with him. The neighbor rushes over to congratulate the farmer. "Oh, how fortunate! Now you have two horses!" The Chinese farmer replies as before, "We'll see."

The next day the farmer's son is out riding the mare to break it in; the mare throws him and he breaks his leg. The neighbor comes over as before, "Oh, how unfortunate. Your son has broken his leg!" The Chinese farmer replies, "We'll see."

A month later the army comes through the area recruiting soldiers. They can't accept the farmer's son because of his broken leg. The neighbor again comes over to sympathize, "Oh, how fortunate! Your son doesn't have to go into the army!" The Chinese farmer again replies, "We'll see."

The story continues on. We learn to keep an open mind about any particular event; we don't always know how fortunate or unfortunate any particular circumstance is, but our openness helps us accept it all resiliently.

But usually we react to our expectations not being met with disappointment. We don't get that reinforcement of pleasure or reward and our body-brain sinks into an oh pooh. Not a problem if we're open to oh pooh's, if we've even learned to expect them in life and learned to learn and grow, to heal and awaken from them. Easier said than done. Conscious, compassionate connection is a primary antidote to disappointment. Gratitude is another powerful practice to antidote disappointment.

We get into trouble with this very important capacity to notice when something is off or wrong because we have also been conditioned to a body of values about what's right and what's wrong. This is also necessary in the human condition. It is an essential job of our family to condition us to the values of our tribe, our clan, our culture, our society, to give us a code to live by that keeps us in the range of what's acceptable, what's wholesome in the view of that society. Just as we are all born with a capacity for spoken language, but the language we actually learn to speak is learned in our family of origin – if our family speaks English, we learn to speak English, if our family's first language is Swedish or Portuguese, we learn to speak Swedish or Portuguese. We learn the codes we have been conditioned to in our family and society. I spent a lot of time around kids and their parents last weekend, and that's a lot of what parents were doing – watch out for cars when you're on your bike; learn to share your toys with your brother, how would you feel if someone did that to you? At least half the conversations.

So, our critical mind is always responding to a standard, a code of what's right and what's wrong, what's wholesome and unwholesome. Whether we're in a Western tradition based on ancient Greek philosophy or Judeo-Christian philosophy of virtue, of ethics, of morality, or an Eastern tradition of Hindu or Buddhist precepts of virtue, of ethics, or morality. It's essential to have a moral compass. The Buddha taught rules and precepts of virtue, ethics, morality, as in the metta sutta, his teachings on kindness. "This is what should be done by one who is skilled in goodness, and who knows the path of peace: let them be able and upright, straightforward and gentle in speech. Humble and not conceited, contented and easily satisfied. Unburdened with duties and frugal in their ways. Peaceful and calm, and wise and skillful, not proud and demanding in nature. Let them not do the slightest thing that the wise would later reprove." Etc. Sila, or virtue, having a moral compass, is one of the major foundations of practice in our tradition.

The good news is the capacity to viscerally know what's wholesome or unwholesome, what gets codified by culture into precepts and rules, is also hardwired in. The capacity is hard-wired in. Not the content; that's conditioned. But the capacity. Modern neuropsychologists like Dacher Keltner, in his book *Born to Be Good*, or Daniel Siegel, in *The Mindful Brain*, anchor morality in the evolutionarily hard-wired capacities for empathy. I can feel in me what you're feeling in you. So I can know what would harm or hurt me will harm or hurt you. And what feels safe and loving me to feels safe and loving to you. Because we have this innate capacity to feel something is off or wrong, we get a felt sense of uh oh, we can harness that capacity to guide us in knowing when we're in alignment with our true nature, when we're acting in the direction of the wholesome or the unwholesome. It is this capacity to feel what rings true, what is in alignment with our true nature, that allows us to discern whether the conditioned values we grew up with are the content of values we want to continue to live by. We can discern which values we want to keep and which other different values we want to adopt, and that's how all of us wound up sitting here in a sangha in the vipassana tradition tonight.

We get into trouble with critical mind when the noticing tips us into shoulding, contracting the evaluation of what's right and what's wrong, which is essential to live a virtuous life, into positions of right and wrong that get more and more contracted, more and more locked, fixed, rigid. This can apply to ourselves, when the inner critic starts pounding on us for a mistake, or when we project that wrong-ness onto another. I should have noticed the no parking signs on that side of the street (that's learning) how stupid of me to get a ticket! That's shaming. You're always making us late, is locking into a blaming position.

This form of criticism can often lead to controlling – either of ourselves so we don't make any more mistakes, or of another so they just please meet our expectations (!) and not require us to change ourselves or our rules. I recently heard Fred Luskin speak, again, on forgiveness, and he made very clear one of the greatest obstacles to forgiving oneself or someone else is clinging to the rules of how things ought to be, especially in our intimate relationships.

And we get into real trouble with critical mind when that assessment or judgment of an error tips into an assessment or judgment of the character of the person, ourselves or another, as wrong or bad. Unfortunately, critical mind is so easily the fast-track into hatred, loathing, and contempt.

By my standards, you're a failure or evil; by someone else's standards or ones I've internalized, I'm a failure or bad.

We've all experienced the deep pain that comes when we're caught in hatred –self-hatred or unrelenting hatred of another. Everything is off. Because hatred, loathing, contempt, is so profoundly out of alignment with our own true nature, our own empathy, our own morality. There is deep suffering when we totally lose sight of the innate true nature of the other.

There's a lot to do to back out of the pain and misery caused by the negative tipping of a critical mind. I think most of us found our way to practice because of some aspect of suffering from the critical shoulding, controlling, contempting mind. Certainly, as a psychotherapist, I see most people coming to therapy to do the deep healing needed around the impact of critical mind, our own or others.

We begin to back out of critical mind tipping into shoulding, controlling, hatred and contempt,

1) when we practice holding our expectations more lightly. It's wise view or wise understanding to know that whatever is happening is happening because of 10,000 causes upstream, some of which we choose ourselves and most of which we don't. Of course, we show up all the time to set the wisest intentions and make the wisest choices possible, every moment, to live by skillful means every moment. But the practice is to remain open to how life is flowing through us, through the people around us, through society, through nature, in this moment. To become more allowing, more accepting, more adaptive. To stay open to options.

2) We back out even more by practicing holding our rules more lightly. We live in a relative world, guided by moral principles that continue to evolve as the human heart evolves. Deep down, there does seem to be a perennial philosophy that the great spiritual and philosophical traditions share, based on common humanity and the inter-connectedness of all life. And our consciousness of that universal conscious compassionate connection continues to evolve, in the practice of the individual and in the consciousness of the collective. One very simple but effective tool to help us back out of our rules is to change every should to a could. You shoulda becomes I could or you could. Simple practice big payoff in creating more space inside.

We back out of controlling by deepening into trust. The root of controlling is that startle or jolt of expectations not being met triggering anxiety. Evolutionarily hardwired as human beings to do that. Negativity bias of the brain and all that. It is a deep lifelong practice to deepen trust, to find the wisdom of insecurity. We cultivate trust moment by moment, mostly through conscious compassionate connection. Oxytocin is the hormone of safety and trust, of bonding and attachment in relationship, of calm and connect. Direct and immediate antidote to anxiety and stress. It is very skillful means to cultivate more love in our life, giving and receiving, taking love into our being, nourishing that sense of innate goodness no matter what. When we feel deeply we are loved, we are safe, we can trust, there's no need to control. (We could do a daylong on deepening trust.

We back out of hatred and contempt through the path of understanding, compassion and forgiveness. I've quoted Thomas Merton here before.

Then it was as if I suddenly saw the secret beauty of their hearts, the depths of their hearts where neither sin nor desire nor self-knowledge can reach the core of their reality, the person that each one is in the eyes of the Divine. If only they could all see themselves as they really are. If only we could see each other that way all the time. There would be no more war, no more hatred, no more cruelty, no more greed. ...I suppose the big problem would be that we would fall down and worship each other.

We summon all the love and compassion we can, wherever we can, until we have a reservoir large enough we can bring the contracted neural cement of hate and loathing into it, and begin to understand, have compassion for, forgive even the unforgiveable. There's a teaching story that's helpful here. If you take a teaspoon of salt and dissolve it in a glass of water and then take a sip of the water – yuk! The water is too salty to drink. If you take a teaspoon of salt and dissolve it into a large freshwater pond, then take a glass of water from the lake and drink from the glass – voila! All is fine; the salt has dissolved in the vastness of the lake and the water has no taste at all. We are all capable ourselves of whatever we have projected out onto another – us v. them. And we are capable of understanding, having compassion for, forgiving as well. In us, in them. Another daylong.

Teeny tiny example. Last Sunday, I accidentally stepped on a low box hedge that I was trying to step across to smell some roses in a public garden. I broke a sizable chunk of branches in the hedge. And of course I went into the contraction – not what I intended, not what I expected, oh pooh, mistake. I felt remorse. I notice my greed but I also noticed the innocence of my intentions, so I felt remorse for the hedge, for the other folks who would see the broken symmetry of the hedge and go through their own not what they expected pooh and maybe their critical mind being triggered.

And I had to work with myself for several minutes - I could have stepped more carefully; I could have let go of wanting to smell those roses and gone off to smell some other roses. I was trying to learn from my mistakes, which is what brains want to do. I noticed my own struggle to not feel bad about myself, having to do an active compassion, forgiveness practice, and because I was percolating this topic for this dharma talk, opened to the perspective: this struggle I'm having right here in this moment is the struggle everyone has, in many moments. And my practicing understanding compassion and forgiveness for myself in this small moments IS the practice I would need to forgive someone else for similar mistakes, or worse, or forgive myself for worse, to forgive myself or someone else for horrible and unconscionable things. It's the same practice.

So we'll do an exercise, an inquiry into our own critical minds, our shoulding, controlling, contempting minds, but also the conscious compassion that can re-direct the capacities of our minds to know something is off in a good direction, and do that in groups of four because the connection itself, when conscious and compassionate, is healing.

Some of you met my friend Rose Saint John when she was here last week with her friend Hetty. When I asked her what she liked best about last week's dharma talk, she mentioned the exercise in groups of four because she and Hetty had a chance to meet people in this sangha. Rose has

taught meditation at the Santa Rosa Insight Meditation Center for years now, often using experiential exercises to build a sense of community. This morning she reminded me that, last summer when she suddenly fell in with sepsis – blood poisoning – and was in a medically induced coma for 11 days, it was members of the sangha who brought food to her husband every day, fed the cat and watered the plants while Patrick was maintaining his vigil at the hospital. So, we're doing the exercise in groups of four to build our sense of community, too.

Directions for exercise:

Decide who goes first; you'll each have three minutes as you go around the circle; I'll ring the bell after each three minutes as it's time to move on to the next person.

Identify a moment of critical mind, when your noticing something that wasn't what you expected or you identified as off or wrong tipped into a negative judgment, shoulding, controlling, or contempting. Identify any suffering or pain that accompanied that tipping into contraction. And then also, if available, identify any practices of conscious, compassionate connection that brought you back out of that contraction.

Discussion.