

Chapter 7

Disarming the Judger

Kindness

Before you know what kindness really is, you must lose things,
feel the future dissolve in a moment like salt in a weakened broth.
What you held in your hand, what you counted and carefully saved,
all this must go so you know how desolate the landscape can be
between the regions of kindness.
How you ride and ride thinking the bus will never stop,
the passengers eating maize and chicken will stare out the window forever.
Before you learn the tender gravity of kindness,
you must travel where the Indian in a white poncho
lies dead by the side of the road.
You must see how this could be you, how he too was someone
who journeyed through the night
with plans and the simple breath that kept him alive.
Before you know kindness as the deepest thing inside,
you must know sorrow as the other deepest thing.
You must wake up with sorrow.
You must speak to it till your voice catches the thread of all sorrows
and you see the size of the cloth.
Then it is only kindness that makes sense anymore,
only kindness that ties your shoes and sends you out into the day
to mail letters and purchase bread,
only kindness that raises its head from the crowd of the world to say
it is I you have been looking for,
and then goes with you everywhere
like a shadow or a friend.

—Naomi Shihab Nye

PORTRAIT OF THE JUDGER

The greatest barrier to our own healing is not the pain, sorrow or violence inflicted upon us as children. Our greatest hindrance is our ongoing capacity to judge, to criticize, and to bring tremendous harm to ourselves. If we can harden our hearts against ourselves and meet our most tender feelings with anger and condemnation, we simultaneously armor out hearts against the possibility of gentleness, love and healing. —Wayne Muller

It was early evening and the day had been a disaster. I was 24 years old and for most of my life I had been running scared, disconnected from myself. I had tried to do it right—to be an idea of what I thought I should be—and I

had failed miserably. The resulting self-revulsion had shown up in self-destructive behaviors such as overeating, drugs and alcohol, along with an overall disgust and disregard of my body. After being raped by a stranger, I decided to go to Europe. The intention was to leave the pain behind. Instead, it traveled with me wherever I went, becoming deeper and broader every day. I ate and drank my way down the road of self-destruction.

In a few days I found myself house-sitting at a beautiful home, high on a hill in Switzerland, but the beauty around me totally escaped my attention. All I could see was the liquor cabinet and the challenge of getting enough to drink without the owners knowing. By adding water to the vodka, I set about consuming enough alcohol to numb the pain. Instead, it opened the floodgates of grief and self-hatred. I fell into a cesspool of despair and hopelessness, desperately searching for more alcohol to hold back the tide. But that only made it worse.

There was not one iota of my being that felt anything but violent revulsion for myself. All of my anger towards life was turned towards myself and it was extremely toxic. Standing at the end of a four-poster bed, I raised my arm to hit the bed in rage and struck the end board. Even with all of the pain, it felt good. "You are a worthless human being, and this is your punishment," said the Judger. I raised my arm again and again and again, bringing it down with as much force as I could muster in my inebriated state. The feelings spent, I crawled exhausted into bed and cried myself to sleep. The next day I woke up to a swollen, throbbing arm and, much to my amazement, was told by the doctor that it was broken.

Even though this is a very sad story, it is not an isolated human experience. Many people on this planet at this exact moment are lost in this level of self-judgment, acting in ways that are destructive towards themselves, their loved ones and society as a whole. But for most of us, our self judgment is more subtle, concealed in a mind that believes we need to be different than we are. Usually subtly, but sometimes quite loudly and obnoxiously, it compares us to some mythical idea of who we should be and then berates us for coming up short of perfection. It comes out of a deep belief at the center of our story that says who we are is not acceptable.

Have you ever been afraid to tell a loved one the truth about a part of yourself because you're certain he or she would leave? That is the I am not good enough, right enough, perfect enough to be loved place. The chant goes on to say, "I should be better. I have to, I ought to, I must do or be whatever my arbitrary definition of being enough is." So we become an ongoing project, struggling to approximate perfection, all the while secretly knowing we've become an idea about ourselves rather than being who we really are.

The shoulds and oughts within us can grow to monstrous proportions, completely blotting out our beauty, uniqueness and perfection, and freezing us out of life. Imagine you are sitting in a restaurant with two people in the booth behind you. One is talking to the other exactly the way we talk to ourselves. Most people would have to get up and leave. As Stephen Levine has said, "If we talked to our friends like we talk to ourselves, we wouldn't have any friends." The unconscious mind's cruelty is pervasive and relentless.

THE BIRTH OF THE JUDGING MIND

We are all trying to be cool,
very fearful and guarded,
hoping we won't say it wrong,
or somebody will discover we are a phony.

—Patricia Sun

At a gathering of Western Buddhist teachers, a man tried to describe to the Dalai Lama the depth of self-judgment that he felt inside. Because the Dalai Lama had never experienced the level of self-judgment that can warp and cripple a life, he was deeply moved by the feelings this man was expressing. He stopped what the group was doing and asked everyone to share if they too experienced this cruelty of the mind. When they all answered "yes," he was amazed.

Every human being, including the Dalai Lama, carries some level of self-judgment. It is called guilt and is a useful tool for functioning within the framework of society. But in the disconnected, industrial societies of the West, this voice has grown to enormous proportions within most human beings, moving from the level of I've done something wrong to I am wrong. How did this come to be so?

At our birth, we were pure innocence and uniqueness. We were also extremely vulnerable. Everything was much bigger than we were and definitely more powerful, and the primal need for survival was in our genes. A part of us knew that these giants we lived with were the ones who could either give or withhold the essentials— food, water and shelter. Our animal nature understood perfectly that to please them meant life. To not please them meant death. Molding and shaping ourselves to the unspoken requirements of our family environment became the order of the day. Ram Dass, author of *Remember, Be Here Now*, calls it somebody training—learning the skills to be what we should be according to our family system and our society.

We didn't put all of this energy into becoming what our parents needed us to be just to get our basic survival needs met. We also did this to get their attention. Attention is nourishment, and we all thrive in its glow. At its best, it is pure Love, but in whatever form, we needed connection even more than food and water. In order to fully develop, we needed focused and accepting interactions with other human beings, people who were able to meet us exactly as we were.

At the time I was a child, many parents were incapable of truly meeting their children or could only do so for brief moments before they would disconnect again. The focus of that generation was acquiring a better life. They had gone through the Depression and World War II and they were concerned with secular safety and the appearance of things. Two cars in the garage with a washer and dryer, readily available drink and smoke, and life was good. Their focus was so outer-directed that, for the first time since mammals showed up, babies were not nourished by a mother's breast.

Our mothers were also convinced by their doctors that to be anesthetized during the birth experience was the best way to go. And in those first precious days after our birth, when the bonding that is necessary for the mothering experience to be generated, our mothers were recovering from the anesthesia, while we lay in a nursery far away. Being this disconnected from their children, these women could accept that bottle feeding every four hours, whether we were awake or not, was appropriate, and that if we cried in between, this was just the child's willfulness which needed to be thwarted.

In my own life, I not only didn't receive the breast, I was not held while being fed. The bottle propper, that invention from hell that hung the bottle above the baby while it lay in its bed, was the rage of the time. There was no heartbeat for me to listen to, no adoring gaze of my mother, no tender playing with my hair. When I tried to give myself some loving connection by sucking my thumb, it was painted with a foul tasting substance. When I sucked my fingers, they were painted too. But the desire to be comforted is primal, and I sucked my fingers, bad tasting guck and all. My parents were so disconnected that they then splinted my fingers with popsicle sticks. My mother shared with me years later the grief she felt when she listened to me wailing and whimpering in my crib. But the programming and disconnection of her generation was too strong for her to rise above it.

I have been rereading *Gorillas in the Mist*, the story of Diane Fossey's interaction with the gorillas of Rwanda. After years of watching the different families, it was evident to her that if gorilla children had attentive and supportive parents, they were inquisitive and fun loving children, safe in their environment. If their parents were inattentive or unemotional, they often became either very shy and tentative, or irritating and even rebellious.

With no bonding time after birth and with our parents being so outwardly directed and disconnected, most of us got only moments of true connection. This is one of the main reasons we become an idea of what we think we should be rather than what we are. In order to survive, we learned very early on to adapt and become whatever our parents needed us to be to keep the thread of this connection alive.

Children will go to amazing lengths to become the child their parents want, and they are very sensitive and responsive to the unspoken needs of their family. If our parents desired a quiet little girl, we tamed our exuberance. If they demanded a little boy who was brave and strong, we tried to curtail our tears. If pleasing and molding ourselves to what was expected didn't work, we withdrew or rebelled, both of which are attention-getting devices.

With every generation since then, we have become more skillful in our parenting, but still, many children don't receive the minimum daily requirement of pure attention that is needed to grow into a healthy and mature adult. We live in a society that is so outer-directed that success is defined by the amount of money we make and the house we live in rather than the quality of our human relationships.

The less of the basic requirement of unconditional attention we received and the more we got the exact opposite is the degree to which the self-judging quality of the mind will gain power. We all created a part of ourselves that was watching as to whether we were being the right kind of child. This part is the Judger. The more unsafe the situation was, the stronger the voice of judgment. It watched every move we made, becoming the architect of the somebody we thought Life needed us to be. The Judger listened to the adults in its environment and then internalized their voices, learning how to shame any part inside that felt like it could threaten survival—our rage (“Don’t you dare raise your voice to me!”), our selfishness (“You are bad for not wanting to share your toys.”), our fear (“Don’t be such a fraidy cat!”), our sadness (“Big boys don’t cry”). These words we heard from our parents became the way we learned how to relate to ourselves.

Besides not being seen, there was one other thing operating in our childhood that made the growth of the Judger possible. We felt we were the center of the Universe. Our sense of other was not very highly developed, so the conclusion we came to was that if something was not right—if our parents were mad at each other, if they abused us, if they were considering a divorce—it was because we had done something wrong. All we have to do is interview children of all ages whose parents have divorced to discover that every single one believes that they were to blame. Deep in our story, each one of us has beliefs of how bad we were when we were children that then follow us into adulthood. We hide this fear that we are bad and wrong deep inside ourselves, and this belief is always secretly looking for more proof of our defectiveness.

Robert Bly, a well-known poet, has a wonderful analogy. He says that we arrive from the far reaches of the Universe as 360-degree balls of radiance, place ourselves at our parent’s feet, and say, “Here I am.” And they say, “I want you to be different.” That’s where the Judger begins. It points out all of the unacceptable parts inside us and shoves them back into what Bly calls the long, dark bag we drag behind us. What we hide composts in the bag, gets wild and builds up a big head of steam while we expend all our energy maintaining a mask by which we purchase love and affection. Whenever these wild parts threaten to break out of the bag—our power, stubbornness, exuberance, terror, sadness, rage—we deny, numb out or project them onto someone else as fast as we can. We relate to these parts exactly as they were met when we were developing the image of ourselves, usually with fear and rejection.

We have become a society motivated by a great yearning for Love, and at the same time permeated by the terror that we won’t be good enough to get it. We are performers, moving out of the tragic fear that we are not lovable until we do it right. Two of the favorite conversations of the Judger are: What did I do wrong? and What do I need to do in order to stop this? This keeps us lost in the land of war, always looking for what needs to be different and continually trying a variety of methods to fix, change, get rid of or ignore that which we deem defective. Rarely, if ever, do we know how to meet and love ourselves exactly as we are.

THE PRICE WE PAY

If we could read the secret history of our enemies, we should find in each man’s life
sorrow and suffering enough to disarm our hostilities.

—Longfellow

In order to move beyond believing what the Judger is saying, it is skillful to see the effects it has in our lives. The prime detriment is that the Judger cuts us off from our lives. Imagine what it was like very early in your life when you were comfortable with yourself and with your life. You probably don’t remember this but you, like all people, lived for a time completely at one with your life. Then you began, in response to people and events around you,

to weave a story in your head about who you were and what you needed to be. You became a human doing rather than a human being.

Now imagine yourself as an adult, sitting in a room, immersed in a novel about your life titled *What I Need To Do To Become Whole*. In order to focus on this story, you have to shut out the experience of Life all around you. This is what it is like inside of us. For most of the moments of our lives, we are all immersed in this story in our heads rather than being present for the adventure that is our lives.

The Judger also causes us to live in the agonizing land of regret—"if only I hadn't, or why didn't I?" We can all feel the dropping sensation in our stomachs as we hear these words. Yes, we all have done things that were unskillful. We have all lied, cheated and put ourselves first. We have hurt friends and loved ones deeply, sometimes knowingly, sometimes unknowingly. But if we step back far enough, we can see that each of these mis-takes in our lives taught us something and even, in some deep way beyond our ordinary comprehension, gave to those we hurt essential experiences in the unfolding of their lives.

To be caught in the land of self-judgment also freezes us out of the well of creativity that lies within every one of us. Rather than engaging with the adventure of our lives, we sit on the sidelines, frozen into the belief that we aren't enough. To see how frozen we are, imagine you have just come to this planet and you see somebody whiz by on a mountain bike. You say, "Hey, that looks like fun." So off you go to find a bike. Your first time on it, you pedal a few times and fall over, skinning your elbow. "What did I do wrong?" you say. You get back on the bike and pedal a few more times before falling the other way, skinning your knee. "I can't ride a bike because I didn't get my master's degree. Or maybe it is because my nose is too big," you mumble to yourself. So off you go to have plastic surgery and wonder why it doesn't help. Then you try again, falling over the handlebars this time. You then decide that there must be something so defective inside of you that you stop trying to ride the bike and put down the kickstand, trying to look cool. Every once in awhile, you move the bike around so people will think that you have been riding the bike and hope nobody will notice that it's not true.

Being run by the need to always do things right, we cut ourselves off from all that is spontaneous, authentic and creative in us. We close the door to being engaged with the adventure of living because the Judger in us believes it isn't safe. The Judger denies, rejects and crushes all that doesn't fit into its idea of what we should be. As we get older, it gains momentum and we become tighter and tighter, struggling to make ourselves better so we will finally be worthy of the Love that we yearn for.

If only becomes our mantra. If only we lose ten pounds or become more loving or understand where our heartaches come from, we will be okay. We become caught in an endless struggle of trying to be perfect and wonder why we feel so empty. There is only one problem. This doesn't work. We have become addicted to the struggle itself—to the idea that we are an ongoing project in need of getting it together. But struggle never brings the depth of healing we desire.

One of the most powerful side effects of the Judger is the meanness it generates in the world. It took courage and unflinching honesty to see how much I judged other people. At long meditation retreats I began to notice that if I was in my center, I experienced other retreatants from either a neutral position or from one of an open heart. If I was struggling, wanting myself and my meditations to be different than what they were, my experience dramatically changed. I would judge them for being too loud, too stiff, too slow, too precise. I would judge them if I perceived they were trying to do it right (look at them trying to be so cool), and I would judge them if they were doing it wrong (my version of wrong). It was astounding and very freeing for me to see that I experienced anybody else's success as a threat to my own. As I began to watch, I could see how much judging operated in my life, usually very subtly, but it was there nonetheless.

There was a vivid moment during a meditation retreat I attended when I clearly saw the part of my mind that sees other people's success as a judgment upon my own. I was eating a snack during a mid-morning break. My intent for the retreat was to be present for my food. I wasn't. My mind was wandering here and there. A woman sat down three tables in front of me and began to eat. Her eyes were closed, her actions were very present, and I hated her because she was doing it right. I watched my mind begin to judge her, but very quickly it started judging me. My heart completely closed as I beat myself up for my eating and my judging.

Then awareness kicked in, and I was able to soften and open my heart to how much my mind is always expecting me to be doing better than what I am. I let go of my depersonalization of this woman and silently thanked her for

the gift she was giving me—just by being herself. I could then rejoice in her moments of presence, rather than seeing them as a demand that I be better. It became much clearer for the rest of the retreat that when I was accepting exactly who I was, I became deeply accepting of everybody else.

The devastation of comparing and judging shows up strongly in the dance of intimate relationships. When we are judging ourselves, it is practically impossible to see the other person. It took me years after my divorce to acknowledge that my need to focus on the so-called inadequacies of my husband had become the pressure release valve for my own imagined defects. As long as I was trying to change him, I didn't have to see what was asking to be seen in my own life.

The Judger not only keeps us disconnected in one-on-one relationships, but also in groups. One of the places it is easiest to see is within families. Every family has a person who is the repository of its shadow. It is the person the rest of the family is always talking about, going over their deficiencies like a litany. They become the person on whom each member of the family can project their own fear of inadequacy.

If there is deep insecurity in a family or an organization, a single scapegoat may not be enough. Then the group collectively chooses other groups to put down, to be seen as less than. It happens in the caste system in India and causes great human devastation. It happens among different skin colors all around the world, preventing people from coming together as a whole. It also happens around gays and lesbians. Some of the most gifted people this world has ever known have had to hide their sexual preference because of the fear of persecution. There are people all around you, for all sorts of reasons, who feel they can't let you know who they really are.

There is no place where the cruelty of the judging mind is more apparent than on the playgrounds of our schools. Children taunt, harass and torment any child who is different. This is the result of a voice inside of them that says, "You make me uncomfortable because you remind me of how different I feel, so I will insult you and reject you so everyone will think I'm normal."

I once came across a man speaking on one of the daytime talk shows. I was captured by the quality of this person. He radiated strength, integrity and kindness. Instead of ears, he had little bumps on each side of his head, and he was recalling a time when he was about 8 years old and the other boys on his school bus had ganged up on him. He tried hiding under one of the seats, and when he finally made it to the front of the bus, the driver's response was to put him off of the bus. Wandering scared through the city, he finally came across a metropolitan bus stop, but had to search for the courage to get on one of the buses. Thankfully, this driver met him with understanding and compassion and helped him to get to school. The judging voice within children that tries to annihilate anything that is different doesn't disappear when we become an adult. It just becomes more subtle and oftentimes is turned inside towards ourselves.

When we are able to stop judging our judgment, we see that we don't need to judge ourselves, judge others or even judge our own lives. We can see that each and every experience in our lives is a necessary part of this schoolroom of the heart. Each of us got the exact set of parents, the best body, and the most appropriate personality for our journey of awakening. Each and every one of us has been embarrassed time and time again, sadistically hurt and deeply abandoned. And each of us has fallen short of the mark over and over again.

Having a sexually seductive father with whom I had a very difficult relationship, I carried much blame and a victim mentality in relationship to him. As I met my rage and was able to comprehend myself, not as a victim, but as an awakening soul, I had a dream. My father was sitting on the floor of the kitchen where I lived during my teenage years, an extremely traumatic time for me. I came into the kitchen and knelt down in front of him. I said, "Do you know that I am the Earth waking up?" He said, "Yes." I went on to say, "And you were the most perfect father I could have had in order to awaken." Tears began to stream down his face as he received this healing.

Our parents, siblings, teachers and friends simply acted from the place they found themselves in. Whatever gifts of pain they gave us were threads in a tapestry being woven by something bigger than we are. As Shakespeare so eloquently said, "All the world's a stage, and the men and women merely players." What is really going on here is far beyond our comprehension. Nothing is ever about what it seems to be, and in this unfolding, each of us has particular dance steps we are destined to dance, including pleasure and pain, loss and gain.

We can no longer afford to have the judging mind be our predominant view of the world. We need to become honest enough so we can acknowledge that we're all doing the same thing—that we are all caught in the same web

of delusion. Sir Thomas More, on the way to his beheading, was supposed to have said, “We’re all in the same cart going to execution. How can I hate anyone or wish anyone harm?” If we begin to, with great courage and honesty, watch the judging mind, it will take us to the healing of compassion for ourselves, for our loved ones, for strangers, countries, organizations and humanity as a whole.

Only compassion will heal the eons of fallout from the cruelty of the judging mind. It will allow us to see into all the dark corners of the human experience and, in deep empathy, connect with the pain we’re all in—even if it is a king beheading wives, counselors and Thomas More himself. Compassion can see the pain out of which these actions came, whether it is an individual, a family or a societal group that has judged us as inadequate. With this seeing, the heart swells with a great desire to reach out and tenderly meet and hold this common pain, whether it is inside of us or in the world.

BEYOND SELF-JUDGMENT

The healing is to let yourself in when you find yourself the most unacceptable.

—Stephen Levine

There is a way out. And actually it is very simple. It has to be in order not to get caught in the incessant need of the mind to compare and judge our attempts to heal ourselves. We don’t need to destroy the judging quality in our mind nor do we need to deny it’s there or try to leap over it by becoming perfect. This only gives it more power. The healing comes from the ability to see the Judger—to begin to relate to it rather than being lost in its cruelty.

Our standard approach is to try to understand where these voices came from and how to get rid of them. This can just get us more caught in the struggles of the mind. When various people tried to help me, it was invariably based on the belief that something was wrong with me and I needed to be fixed. This approach got translated by the maze of my mind into proof that I was inherently defective which often just drove me deeper into the maze.

At other times, trying to become different or better did help to create better states of mind, and I had moments where I wasn’t devastated by the frontal attacks of my judging mind. But the roots of this cruel Judger were deeply embedded in my being, and its subtle chant of self-hatred still permeated most of my experiences. I no longer hit or mutilated myself, but I would be driving my car and think of something that I had done wrong and would find myself hitting the steering wheel saying “You dumb shit.” Or I would be walking up and down the grocery store aisles chanting “bad girl, bad girl” to myself. The Judger still ran me.

It was when I began to be able to step back enough and see the Judger that I began to experience a level of spontaneity and freedom in my life that I had never known before. To get to know our internal Judger allows us moments of not identifying with what it is saying. Through the process of learning how to relate to it rather than being caught in it has come a freedom from the cruelty of my mind that was absolutely unimaginable for most of my life before awakening.

In order to begin to be able to see and not identify with the Judger, there are four essential things we need to understand about this inner voice.

The first is that absolutely everybody has it. We’re all addicted to self-judgment and we’re all very good at hiding it. A good example is John Bradshaw, bestselling author of *Homecoming* and the popular video series *Bradshaw on the Family*. He has done it right as far as this society is concerned because he has fame and fortune and has accomplished important things in the field of his expertise. And yet in an interview he said, “If you put me in a room with people with letters after their names like Ph.D. or M.D., my shame voices know these people are going to figure out that I do not know anything!” That is the judging mind we all carry. It is important to notice that no matter what we do, no matter what we become, that voice never completely goes away. It can become quieter, but it can flare up at a moment’s notice.

Allow yourself to feel the relief that comes from recognizing that you are not alone. We are all living much of the time inside of a mind that demands we be perfect and judges our attempts to be so. It is much like walking down a path with a hand gripping our arm, subtly pushing us along, yanking suddenly to the left, holding us back, insistently turning us to the right. It's constantly saying that we should be farther along the path or even on an entirely different one. We're so busy trying to respond to its signals that we can't see the beauty that surrounds us and are unable to rest in the unfolding of our lives. Often the pressure of self judgment is subtle, but it's usually there.

The Judger loves to decide what it considers to be success. It may be the buff body of a weight lifter, the fancy life-style of a corporate executive or the joyful spontaneity of a free spirit. Then it looks out and sees somebody who appears to have accomplished this and says, "Wow, they did it. They have it together and I don't." Ah, the cruelty of the mind.

We are so occupied in trying to prop up our image that we never take the time to realize that everyone else feels the same way. In my counseling practice, I hear countless stories of people's belief in their imperfection, and all the while, sitting in front of me I see an exquisite facet of the sacred essence of Life!

The second idea that can bring us freedom from the Judger is that it was born out of benevolence. If we look closely at its birth, we can see that it was a very skillful tool to have when we were growing up. When it first showed up on the scene, it was trying to stop behaviors that seemed to threaten our survival. No matter how outrageous and unconscious it has become, on some level it has always been trying to take care of us.

Imagine a child in the corner of a room where his parents are fighting. Scared to death, the child is saying to himself, "I was a bad boy. I scattered my blocks all over the floor and made my parents mad. Now they are fighting. If I am neat and tidy, then everything will be okay." To take on responsibility for the messes in our family gave us a feeling of control and safety when we were little children.

The third thing that is important to know about the Judger is that it fails to see that mistakes are an integral part of Life. As Stephen Levine once said, "If you take a step forward, you move a few feet. If you fall flat on your face, you move at least five or six feet!" Rather than allowing for mis-takes, we see them as proof that we are bad or wrong. We are like an airplane flying on radar from Los Angeles to Hawaii. The plane is continually drifting off-course with the radar bringing it back. Our lives are also destined to be lived that way, drifting off-course and being brought back over and over again. That is how we learn and grow. And yet most people's navigation system is tuned to the belief that we should never be off-course, and if we are, we are wrong and are failures.

We live in the land of duality—male and female, dark and light, up and down. All of these pairs are a given in Life. But the opposites of right/wrong and good/bad are merely creations of the human mind. What one society may deem natural and good may be absolutely abhorrent in another. Each of us has woven our own code of right/wrong out of the fabric of our family and our society. Rather than using this code as a benevolent radar system for maneuvering through our lives, we use it to bludgeon ourselves. Imagine the pilot in that airplane hating himself every time the radar indicated that an adjustment needed to be made! That is all too often the internal experience of most human beings. The reason we don't use our radar skillfully is that we don't see that moments off course are as integral and important as those moments of being on course. It is our weak points, our failures, our confusions and our mis-takes that teach us clarity, wisdom, compassion and healing.

We're all works-in-progress until the day we die, and freedom comes from allowing ourselves to be human. It is the willingness to embrace our humanness that brings us home. It's okay to make mistakes. A mistake is just a mis-take. The word sin originally was an archery term that meant "off the mark." Making mistakes is a part of the process of learning. One of the main attributes of successful human beings is that they are comfortable with making mistakes. Our perfection is in our non-perfection—what a relief!

The last thing to explore about the Judger is that it doesn't see the whole picture. Imagine a construction site in a downtown area that is fenced off with high boards. There are holes so that people walking by can look in and see how the building is progressing. Imagine somebody looking through one tiny hole and what they see is a pile of garbage. The assumption is made that this is a sloppy and messy construction sight. But because the hole does not allow a complete view of the work area or a comprehension of what had transpired during the day, there is no understanding that this garbage was gathered together in one place in order for the dump truck to pick it up that

evening. There is not even the willingness to concede that garbage is a necessary by-product of the building project.

That is what the Judger does. It looks through a very narrow perspective, focusing on what it sees as defective, and assuming the worst. It doesn't recognize that the garbage of our lives - our personality traits, habits, mistakes and perceived shortcomings - composts quite nicely into fertilizer for our growth.

An example from my life is that I come from a family of lawyers. My father, grandfather, uncle, sister and some cousins are all lawyers and most of the other people in my family have graduated with some degree. One sister studied at Bryn Mawr and the other at the Sorbonne in France. I, on the other hand, never graduated from college. I was also 18 months younger than a sister whose mode of survival in our family was to become the accomplished one. In keeping with that identity, she got straight A's. I got A's and B's and my self-judger said, "Boy, are you dumb." She became a successful lawyer, while I did not discover my destiny until I was almost 40, which proved to me that I was not as intelligent as the rest of my family and that I was a failure.

I believed this deeply for years, and if somebody complimented me on a moment of intelligence, I would think, "I certainly have them fooled." This belief had grown to such enormous proportions that I was defenseless in the face of the Judger's relentless cruelty. When the Judger pointed out to me the million ways that I was stupid, it sounded exactly like an accomplished trial lawyer who had prepared an ironclad brief with footnotes and a bibliography as thick as an encyclopedia that proved I was less-than everybody else.

Being so completely convinced by the Judger that I was inept and stupid, I didn't have a clue about who I really was. As I have discovered how to relate to the Judger by watching it, I have learned how not to be seduced by its voice, and its ironclad case for my stupidity has dissolved in the light of my attention. I have also discovered that, underneath its conversation, the exact opposite of what I thought myself to be is true—that I have an innate intelligence that helps me to live a skillful and compassionate life!

SEEING THROUGH THE JUDGER

Our task is not to seek for Love. It is to seek for all of the barriers that we have built that stand in the way.

—A Course in Miracles

As we reflect on these four dynamics of the Judger—

- 1) That we all have this judging quality of mind and are not defective for having taken it on;
- 2) That it was born out of the need to have a part of us monitor our behaviors in order to survive and feel safe;
- 3) That it doesn't accept the value of making mistakes;
- 4) That it has no idea of who we really are;

there comes a possibility of being able to see it rather than being run by it. From this perspective, we don't need to judge the Judger. Our freedom comes when we can relate to these ancient beliefs we have taken on rather than hating or fearing what they are saying. In order to do this we have to get to know these voices. At the beginning it can feel a little like going to confront a fire-breathing dragon in its cave. Much to my amazement, as I journeyed to the dark cave of my self-judgment, instead of finding a destructive monster, I found Puff the magic dragon!

I was given an inkling that maybe the Judger wasn't as all-powerful as I had thought during a retreat Stephen Levine was giving at Breitenbush Retreat Center in Oregon in 1985. We were doing small group processes in which my self-cruelty was making itself well-known. A counselor in my group came up to me afterwards and said, "I notice that you have a very highly developed self-critical voice. Would you like to do an experiment with me?"

I was willing to do almost anything to get relief, so I went outside with her and we sat on a swing. She asked me to close my eyes and get a picture of what this voice would look like. I froze. “You never do anything right,” said the Judger, “and you aren’t going to be able to do this.” With her gentle coaxing, I was finally able to see an image of a tall, fierce and very hard, old man. He looked like an evil wizard with dark and powerful robes swirling around him. He was standing on top of a mountain, looking down at me with fire pouring out of his eyes. His arm was stretched out in front of him with his index finger pointing out the depth of my imperfection. I cringed when this image developed in my mind. It was so accurate and felt so real.

“Now,” she said, “do something funny to him.” I froze again. “Do something funny? With him? You’ve got to be kidding,” I thought. I made a feeble attempt. The mountain began to crumble away but he kept his footing, and the finger kept pointing at me. Then, in a flash, and from where I do not know, an eagle flew over and pooped in his face! Seeing his astonished look, laughter bubbled up from within me. It was a powerful moment. For my whole life I had believed whatever he said. In that instant, this ancient voice began losing its power over me.

Of course it came back again, but that tiny bit of spaciousness allowed the seed of curiosity to grow, and I began to pay attention, becoming fascinated with what my Judger said about me. I then noticed that as I began to watch, it would hide, becoming very subtle. So I carried around a notebook, and when I became aware of judging, I would write down what the Judger said.

At the beginning, it was easier to see myself judging other people, but it quickly became evident that all my judgments of others were simply the fallout from my own self-judgment. Whether it was about their looks, actions or thoughts, they were a mirror of my own self-talk. Then I would come home and write these snippets of conversation from the judging mind on a large piece of newsprint tacked to my wall. Over the months I began to be able to see definite patterns in my style of judging and hear more clearly this litany that traveled with me everywhere.

True freedom from the self-cruelty of our minds comes from noticing what the Judger is saying and realizing it is only a belief system that was created in our minds when we were young. To see it, we need to become a Judger sleuth, with magnifying glass and pen light in hand, exploring and looking for the ways in which our Judger operates.

There are numerous ways to do this. A returning practice is a fertile place to watch the judging mind. For most people, when they begin closing their eyes and inviting themselves to be with their immediate experience, their mind is like a puppy dog, wandering here and there, chasing after the mailman and keeping everybody up all night long with its barking. We all assume that a good meditator is one whose mind is trained to heel and behave. Even though my teachers repeatedly said that this wasn’t so, the judging, comparing mind inside of me was so thick and heavy that these words didn’t diminish my self-judgment. Every time I found my mind wandering, I would jerk myself back with the judgment, “Bad mind” or “Bad meditator.”

Gradually, I moved beyond this mean and painful attitude until I could bring myself back with more mercy. But the roots of the judging mind went so deep that I lived for years comparing one meditation to another, berating myself for not being concentrated enough. The way out of this maze of struggle was to see this judgment and bring to it a tender heart.

You can also get to know the Judger as you move throughout your day. It can be helpful in the beginning to write down what you discover. When I was doing this, it was as though I became a reporter doing an article on self-judgment and needed to go out and gather information. This allowed me to be curious about the activity of self-judgment rather than hiding from it or judging the judgment. If this calls to you, carry a small notebook or a voice activated recorder with you, because the Judger shows up at the least expected times. Whenever you notice a moment of self-judgment, make a note of what it says as soon as you can.

It is usually easier in the beginning to notice your judgments of others. It is something that we all do all day long as a safety valve for our own self-judgments. There is no accident who you judge. The key is to pay attention to who really bugs you. They carry for you a disowned, disliked part of yourself. As you pay attention—without judging yourself for how much you judge—these external judgments will reveal to you your own internal self-judgment.

Another very constructive way to see the Judger is to create a gestalt experience, sitting in one chair and placing an empty chair in front of you. When you move to the other chair, become the Judger, looking back at yourself and saying all of the things that disgust you about yourself. Then write down all that it said. You could also use a recorder so you can hear the nuances of its litany. Allow it free reign to vent so you can see its story. If dialogue is not your style, you can dance it out, shouting into the space around you these ancient voices.

The key is to do something that allows you to see these voices and get to know how they operate. The old adage, “knowledge is power” is very applicable here. The more I got to know my Judger, the less I bought into what it was saying. When it roared through with one of its favorite voices such as “I can’t do this because I am not good enough...or powerful enough...or smart enough,” I could now notice, “This is the Judger,” rather than believing what it was saying.

To bring the Judger to the light of day, it is also skillful to keep a journal in which you actually write to this quality of your mind. You put on paper all of your hopes and fears, your rage and confusion, your desire to heal. Write of the agony these voices have brought into your life and the grief that they leave behind. Let out the rage you feel for being constantly watched by the Judger and the fear that you will never be good enough. When there is space around the rage, grief and fear, speak of your longing to come back into the healing of your heart. Then give yourself some space, and when you are ready, go back and read what you wrote. Every time you recognize a feeling, whether it is hope, sadness, fear or judgment, pause for a moment and say, “I see you.”

It is essential in this journal to allow the Judger to write back to you so you can hear its side of the story. It is a part of you. It was birthed from the need for Love and the requirement that you be a particular way in order to get it. You have sent judgment into your Judger. You have sent hatred into that which hates you. You have tried to annihilate it, deny it and destroy it. It has important things to say to you, a perspective on the dance of your life you may never have heard before.

At the beginning it may need to point out all of your imperfections, but as you give it space to rant and rage, and as you learn not to believe the content of what it is saying, its inherent wisdom and benevolence will begin to show up. I have learned much about my Judger in this way and I believe that this process was one of the most important steps I took in forgiving this voice that had tortured me for so long.

It can also be helpful to make a list in your journal of all of the things that you like about yourself. When I was first asked to make such a list, I went back to my therapist the next week and said I could not think of one thing to put down. He asked me, “Did you take a shower before you came today?” I said, “Yes.” “And did you pick up the bath mat afterwards?” “Yes, I did,” I responded. Number one on my list was “I pick up bath mats.” That was the level at which I had to begin.

This list can help you to be kind to yourself when the Judger takes over again, as it will. In addition, you can make a list on one side of a page of all of the things you most dislike about yourself. And then beside each one, write down what the exact opposite quality would be and begin to contemplate the possibility that this is who you really are.

Another useful skill is to work with a mirror. In the beginning you may not be able to even look at yourself without waves of self-judgment. In that phase you can gather much input for your Judger Journal. I did mirror work quite consistently for a long period of time. I didn’t see the depths of the results until one evening, while getting ready to turn off the lights and crawl into bed, I saw my reflection in the window and had an immediate burst of tenderhearted love. What a difference from the first experiences of trying to look at myself in a mirror when all I could see was what was wrong with me! Now the mirror is my ally. If an old pattern of judging has come to roost, I just look in the mirror and give myself a wink, and the old belief dissolves.

If you have a trusted friend or counselor, it can also be very healing to have a place where you share the conversation that goes on in your head, and, if there is deep trust, parts of your journal as well. It is essential that this person be somebody who just listens rather than trying to fix, judge or rearrange the contents of your mind. It is also important that they have a heart you can basically trust.

Even though it feels risky to name and then share with others what we have hated about ourselves, the pay off is marvelous. There was a woman who shared a secret in one of my Awakening groups. In return, she was received with great heart and understanding. At the closing circle, she cried in relief, but when she called the next morning,

lost again in self-judgment, she was certain that the group was just being nice and really wanted to reject her completely. This was not true, but that is the Judger's way.

Exploring how these voices got such a strong foothold in her again, it came down to one person in the group who had been silent the previous night when she was sharing. All of her fears of being worthless got projected onto this woman's silence. Knowing a lot about both of them, I had a strong sense that the silent woman was experiencing fear rather than judgment. Both women had similar fears and the silent one's fears were being deeply triggered by the other woman's sharing.

When the woman on the phone could see this, the Judger's voice quieted down, and she was able to again feel the love that was there for her. This experience helped her to see that it was safe to share her voices of self judgment. Through this it became easier for her to bring the hidden parts of herself to the light of day in order to discover how off base they are. When the Judger is seen, both by ourselves and by others, its power is diminished tremendously.

As you become able—for moments—to see your self-judgment, it is skillful to give this part of your story a name. It makes it easier to relate to it rather than being lost in what it is saying. Before I had any ability to relate to this voice, when I was asked what I experienced when it was there, I said it was like standing on a tiny stage in the middle of a small, dark auditorium. Rising from every single side of this stage were tiers of bleachers filled with black hooded, faceless beings all screaming their rage at my imperfections. I named these voices the Gallery. This name allowed me moments of not cowering in fear at what they had to say.

The next step was to get to know the various parts of the Gallery. As each of these voices of my litany started to become clear to me, the name turned into the Judger. Every time I was able to say, "The Judger," (rather than saying, "I did that wrong, or I will never get it together, or why am I so stupid"), I took another step into freedom from these terrifying voices.

Now, as I have learned to become bigger than this ancient movement of self-hatred and as I have seen that the core intention of the Judger was to make me good enough for Love, the name has changed to the Guardian. It still comes through at times, especially when I am tired, but I don't have to identify with it. If I ever do, it is only for a short period of time before there comes welling up from my heart the awareness that the guardian is here trying to take care of me.

I can thank the Judger because it carved deep caverns in my heart and eventually cracked it wide open. I would not be who I am today without the fierceness of this voice. In days of old, warriors honored their opponents. They knew they would not come to the fullness of their potential without an opposing force. I can see now that all of my life the Judger has held the key to the fullness of my potential. It has defined for me *what is* not Love so that *what is* Love could become evident. When I say "Thank you," it comes from the depths of my heart.

Once we get to know this ancient voice inside of each one of us, and once we learn how to respect it without buying into its litany, the Judger can return to its original purpose, discernment. We do need to make choices in this journey—sifting, comparing and sorting through myriad options. But we don't need to make ourselves and others right or wrong in the process. Discernment, a necessary tool for survival, is the Judger operating from the heart, allowing us to make skillful choices as we maneuver through our lives.

THE JUDGER AND THE HEART

That I feed the hungry, forgive an insult, and love my enemy...these are great virtues. But what if I should discover that the poorest of the beggars and the most impudent of offenders are all within me, and that I stand in need of the alms of my own kindness; that I myself am the enemy who must be loved? What then?

—Carl Jung

The Judger is the glue that holds together the armor around our hearts, and at the same time it is the doorway into the heart. Because it is the opposite of an open and present heart, it enables the true nature of the heart to be seen more clearly. We live in the level of duality. If there were no night, there would be nothing called day. Day needs a relationship with night in order to exist. It needs to be in relationship with its opposite. The same is true for the awakening heart. As Stephen Levine has said, “I learned how to be loving by seeing how unloving I am.”

All true and lasting healing happens in the realms of inclusion, the place beyond struggle that only the heart knows. Joseph Chilton Pierce said, “The mind creates the abyss; the heart crosses it.” After all of the trying and doing and understanding, it is when what has formerly been hated and feared drops into the inclusion of the heart that it is healed. The heart is the only place that can include it all—our strengths and our weaknesses, our clarity and our confusion, our pain and our joy, our dark and our light.

We yearn for this place of mercy, for the ability, at least for moments, to know and accept ourselves as we are so then we are free to meet our lives in clarity and compassion. We also long in our hearts to remember the sacredness of Life, both for ourselves and for our world.

Because we have traveled so far from our hearts, it is essential to consciously cultivate kindness, compassion, and mercy. We will now explore each of these more fully. If we seed these concepts in our minds so that they can begin to penetrate the thick walls of judgment and expectation that armor our hearts, we will see glimmers of the vast healing capabilities of an open heart.

Kindness

The first and most basic step in cultivating the inclusion of an open heart is the art of loving-kindness. Kindness is the visible activity of the heart. It is the healing of goodwill that says, “I want you to be happy.” Underneath the struggling mind that turns people into objects and parts of ourselves into problems, lies a deep well of kindness that carries the capacity to heal the world. As Theodore Isaac Rubin said, “Kindness is more important than wisdom, and the recognition of this is the beginning of wisdom.”

The afterglow from an act of kindness for someone else gives us glimpses of what it would be like to be kind to ourselves. Practicing kindness out there allows us to cut through our old conversations and gives us the impetus to be kind to the person in our own lives who is most in need of it—ourselves.

To be kind to ourselves is one of the most healing things we can do for all beings. For just like the violence that we do to ourselves ripples out into the world, so too does the kindness. If we can’t relate with a heartfelt generosity to the piece of the planet we are sitting in, how can we possibly be kind to the rest? And yet we think this is selfish. Nothing could be further from the truth. To be kind to ourselves fosters kindness in the world.

In Buddhism, there is a wonderful practice called metta, the art of loving-kindness. In addition to sending loving kindness to all beings, it includes the phrase, “May I be happy; may I be free from suffering; may I know peace.” It is a love song from ourselves to ourselves.

When I first began adding these to my daily practice, it was like peeling layers of an onion. There were days when I could truly wish the best for myself and there were days when all I could feel was my imagined unworthiness. Remembering that awakening is the art of being with *what is*, I realized that wanting to reject any response of kindness highlighted to me how closed my heart was to myself. Finally I learned that I could be kind to my response of being unable to be kind!

Through cultivating kindness, I am now able to keep my heart open to the formerly unacceptable parts of myself. I have also discovered that I can include in my heart the most heinous of criminals and even the people who have brought the most pain into my life. This doesn’t mean that I like or condone their actions. It means that I am able to feel the common pool of pain out of which all of our unskillful actions come. In remembering that we all have known greed, fear, rage and delusion, given the right set of circumstances, who knows what any of us may do? When I remember this, it then becomes possible to include them in my heart.

The power of a loving kindness practice is that we can make it our own. We can listen carefully as to where we need to focus our kindness, whether it is ourselves, a friend or a politician we have put out of our heart. Then we can create the words that awaken deep kindness within us. The traditional words—“May I be happy, may I be free

from suffering, may I know peace” (or “May you be ____” (when bringing kindness to another)— can be used as a platform for our own phrases. At one retreat they transformed for me into, “May I be centered no matter what appears. May I know the joy of a loving and spacious heart. May I be vibrantly healthy and alive.” At a time when I was meeting great terror, I said to this part of myself over and over again, “May I have the courage to meet you when you appear. May I meet you with a kind and compassionate heart. May I know the peace of remembering that you are just a state of mind.”

Loving kindness practice is only one possible way of cultivating kindness for ourselves and others. Other ways to add it into our daily lives can be as simple as the willingness to live in the question, “How can I be kind to myself today?” Adding one kind thing we do every day (whether it is something for yourself or for another), paves the road to an open heart. It can also be as basic as imagining your breath moving through your heart every time a phone rings and allowing that breath to remind you to be merciful with yourself.

A powerful act of kindness is to make a commitment for just one day to replace every judging thought we notice with one that comes from tenderness and mercy. Another of my healing practices has become tenderly placing my hand over my heart whenever I find myself caught in judgment. I also rely upon calling to mind somebody with an open heart, imagining what they would do in any given situation. Sometimes it is a wise teacher, sometimes my children and sometimes it is a dear friend.

A phrase that I have learned that allows me to cut through the most contracted of my judgments of others is just like me. When I find myself judging another person as wrong and putting them out of my heart, saying “just like me” allows me to remember that we are all in this together. When we are judging, it is so easy to forget that we have also acted from the same unskillful places in our lives.

By far one of the most powerful acts of kindness we can do for ourselves is to receive kindness from others. When we react from our sense of unworthiness that says we aren’t good enough to receive *what is* being offered, we do a great disservice to the person who has come into our lives bearing gifts of kindness. By hiding from or rejecting kindness, we deny them the joy of giving and the depth of healing that can come from these acts. And yet, for me it was much easier to give kindness than to receive it. Those old voices of unworthiness were afraid of kindness, so oftentimes I would try to do even impossible tasks by myself.

We not only receive kindness from people, it comes from nature, too. We can live because the sun gives of itself every moment of our lives. Rather than recognizing how much it is showering us with its generosity, we either completely ignore this bountiful giving, or else we take it for granted. The wind loves to caress our cheeks and play with our hair. The Earth loves to hold us and we are loved by Life, but in our failure to receive these gifts, we feel disconnected and alone.

Whatever you choose as a kindness practice, know that cultivating kindness for ourselves and for others is one of the most powerful gifts we can give to the world. Alfred Adler said, “There is a law that man should love his neighbor as himself. In a few hundred years, it should be as natural to mankind as breathing or the upright gait; but if he does not learn it, he must perish.” To become kindness itself is a process which often feels exactly like learning how to play a musical instrument. Evoking from the instrument the sweetest music it is capable of takes practice, and some days will be easier than others. But the rewards that come from cultivating an open heart are so well worth it. The healing that is possible for ourselves and for our world—the healing that comes only from an inclusive heart—is beyond our wildest imagination.

The Awakening of Compassion

If kindness is the natural activity of an open heart, then compassion is its fuel. This is the capacity to respond rather than react to the pain that is inherent in living, meeting it from the spaciousness of the heart. Our usual reaction to pain and suffering is to slam closed the door of our heart through judgment, fear and opposition. Oftentimes our favorite chant is, “Oh shit!” Whether we cut our hand, have an auto accident, or meet a sudden death, “Oh shit” characterizes our knee jerk reaction of resistance.

This doesn’t just happen in traumatic situations. For many of us “Oh shit” is a core chant of our lives. Pain is seen as something to fear, something to resist, a mistake, an error. Every non-compassionate reaction to pain (our own or another’s) adds another layer of armoring around our hearts, keeping us locked out of our own lives.

But pain is a part of living in a body. We've all had our hearts broken, our toes stubbed, our hopes disappointed, our trust betrayed. The depth to which we meet pain with contempt and resistance is the depth to which we will be disconnected from the healing of our own hearts. Compassion is the ability to feel pain—both our own and others'—without falling into it. It is the art of meeting whatever happens with an open heart and is the great re-weaver of the tattered threads of our lives.

Even though the dictionary defines compassion as the ability to feel another's pain, where it is truly learned is with our own pain. The schoolroom of compassion is our own lives—our own fears, rages and judgments, and our own addiction to acting from the mind rather than responding from the heart. Compassion is the ability to bring mercy into all those parts of ourselves we haven't yet accepted. It is moving out of a project mentality and into meeting ourselves exactly where we are. A definition of compassion I like is "nonviolent accompaniment." We do great violence to ourselves by constantly trying to get rid of our pain. Compassion is the willingness to be present for the ebb and flow of pain in our lives. From that comes the joy of being able to accompany ourselves—no matter *what is* appearing—down the path of our lives.

The quickest way to move beyond pain is not to resist it. In seeing and accepting who we are in this living moment, we begin to have a taste of freedom. By being fully with ourselves no matter *what is* appearing, the clouds will begin to part and we will discover our own true nature. This is the magical doorway into the mystical union that lies at the heart of our most profound teachings, and yet this meeting is so alien to us. We are extremely skilled in bruising ourselves where we are already bruised, in finding the places inside of ourselves that are the most broken, the most painful, the most incomplete and claiming that they are just clear evidence that we are defective. We are also steeped in the illusion that pain is to be feared. It takes courage to see how brutal we are with our own pain. It takes courage to make space for all that we have held in contempt for so long. And it takes courage to allow ourselves into the light of our own hearts.

The phrase we explored in Chapter 5—*this too*—is a powerful awakener of compassion. When I am caught and struggling, lost in the reactionary mind, these two words soften my response, allowing me to make space for whatever is. *This too* says that I don't have to fight this, resist this, war with it. *This too* says yes to even the most painful aspects of my life—that they can be included in the journey of awakening.

Oprah Winfrey, when describing the gifts Maya Angelou had brought into her life, said one of the most powerful ones came from a moment of great despair. Sitting on her bathroom floor and crying so hard she could barely speak, she called Maya. While Oprah was trying to describe the situation through a torrent of tears, Maya said, "Stop right now, and say thank you to the experience!" In other words, include the pain. The willingness to meet whatever comes with an open heart (thank you and *this too*) allows whatever is to move through our lives and keeps us out of the locked prison of resistance.

I once had a vivid experience of the healing that can come from the combination of *what is?* and *this too*. I was at a long meditation retreat in the high mountain desert of California. I had called in advance to see if the retreat staff could accommodate my special food needs for there were very few foods I could eat at that time. They assured me they could. I requested that a few days supply of grains and vegetables be made up in advance and put in the retreatants' refrigerator so that I could heat up my own food and not have to bother the kitchen staff at every meal. They agreed that this was a good idea. When I arrived at the center, I put my request in writing and also spoke to one of the cooks.

It took two days and a couple of requests before I got some of the grain that I had requested. And it was not until the 4th night, after numerous requests, that I went to the kitchen in frustration to communicate that I still hadn't received any vegetables, which constituted over half of my diet. Standing in a side hallway, I made my request again. The cook I was talking to pulled me into the kitchen and, in front of a number of the retreatants, proceeded to open the refrigerator and try to make the point with great energy that the veggies had been there all the time and that I was just not paying attention.

There were, of course, no veggies there and I began to argue back, knowing they had never been there. Finally, another one of the cooks, overhearing this rather intense discourse, brought the veggies out from a back refrigerator, one that retreatants had no access to. The veggies had indeed been made up, but they had never been made available to me.

As I walked out of there that night, feeling rage from not being heard and then deep self judgment for having made a scene, awareness kicked in when I remembered *what is*. As curiosity took over, I was able to feel what was happening in my body and listen to it closely, and I recognized a core pattern of rage and hopelessness.

There could not have been a more perfect scenario for me to meet these core patterns that had been deeply embedded inside of me. I knew I had the opportunity to cut through them and give to myself what was not given when I was young—the ability to be present in a loving, caring and understanding way. My heart began to open. “*This too*,” I said, “I can meet myself here, too.” All the resistance to being with the pain fell away, and with my heart I could touch this pain that had been running me my whole life.

Even though I was now meeting myself with compassion, I hadn’t yet been able to do this with the other people who were part of this experience. Not only were they completely locked out of my heart, but I also felt great resistance about even being around them. It took a while to recognize that this rage was burning a hole in my own heart.

Asking Life to show me the way into the healing of compassion, I began to focus more on the gifts that I was receiving than on the devastation. I could then see that every single one of these people was an essential player in the necessary but painful awakening of my heart. I couldn’t have unearthed the deep core of pain inside of me without their assistance in triggering it.

At times my mind would flip into judgment (“They did it wrong”), justification (“I did it right”) and self-judgment (“I handled it wrong, and I can’t go into the kitchen tomorrow”). But then I would return to gratitude for their soul willingness to show up in my life this way and the deep heart remembering of how easily we all can act unskillfully in our lives. At the end of the retreat, when we broke silence, I was able to thank the cook who played such a big role in this healing.

It is usually a lot easier in the beginning of awakening to give compassion to others than it is to give it to ourselves and yet we are the ones who most need it. No matter how great our intention is to be compassionate, we will, over and over again, become unconscious and slip back into the judging, comparing and easily irritated mind. These are the moments where true compassion is forged in the face of its opposite, in the face of how much we still believe in separation and judgment. Cultivating compassion for ourselves and for how all-too-human we can be, allows us to see all beings through benevolent eyes. Through kindness and compassion, prejudice, judgment, comparing and irritation give way to connection, communion and unity.

Mercy

Sometimes when our hearts are first awakening or when we come across a place that we have always resisted, it can seem like the armor around our hearts will never give way. In times such as these there is nothing more powerful than the healing of mercy—mercy for how closed our hearts can be to ourselves and mercy for how unmerciful we can be to others. Mercy says that for this moment I chose to not send any more pain into my pain. It is the invitation to stop harming or punishing ourselves and others for the places where we all are the most unconscious.

There is no greater power than the merciful heart. Even the word mercy has a healing influence. At a Stephen Levine workshop, a woman at the microphone spoke from the pain in her life, but she shared it from that place of hating it, hating herself and hating the world. The energy in the room began to contract the longer she shared. When Stephen began to gently but repeatedly say, “Mercy; have mercy; have mercy on yourself,” the room transformed from reaction to response. There is not one of our challenges, drawbacks or difficulties that can withstand the power of a merciful heart. And there is not one person in this world who is not deserving of this.

A dear friend of mine was in a major transition time. An important relationship, her job and her home were all changing. These are the times where our deepest grief can slip through the cracks of our vulnerability. On the way home from a particularly trying day, she witnessed a family of ducks heading onto the freeway directly in front of a speeding bus. Because there was a fence between her and the freeway, there was nothing she could do. She pulled over to the side of the road and sobbed a river of tears. Instead of being cleansed by this upwelling, she found herself caught in confusion, panic and self-judgment, hating herself for her vulnerability.

Sitting in misery in front of her fireplace that evening, a memory from her childhood surfaced. She saw herself sitting on a stool in a warm and cozy kitchen, while her favorite aunt made her cocoa and toast. She was filled with the care and tenderness of that act. This moved her into the same level of tenderness and mercy with herself. She said that the transition was so dramatic that it was as if all of the heartache and despair of the past few weeks had been a dream and she was finally awake. The ability to meet herself as if she were a beloved child, even in the most vulnerable of places, transformed her experience.

Again, just as with kindness and compassion, the most powerful place we can learn mercy is with ourselves. Let us explore this.

An Invitation

In your mind's eye, see yourself as a baby. Watch yourself learn how to walk and talk, full of curiosity and play. See your beauty and innocence. Feel your core longing to love and be loved.

Now pull into your consciousness an embarrassing situation from those early years—possibly a teacher shaming some work or a failure at sports. Experience for a moment the devastation that comes from the child's perspective—the contraction, horror and self-judgment. Now meet this place from the well of mercy that truly sees how deeply you needed to be comforted and heard.

Move on to your teenage years and the agony and ecstasy of the dating (or no-dating) game. Again allow into your mind a time of unease and confusion. Meet it from the place of mercy that recognizes that awkwardness was a natural response to this very powerful (but completely new for you) dance of mating.

Now, come into adulthood and draw forth another experience that you wouldn't want to share with anyone. Feel how it is more difficult to access mercy when the Judger keeps a tight fist around the heart—"I should have known better; I never do anything right; I always make wrong choices." Put it all aside for a moment, and breathe through your heart. Suspend all judgment and be merciful.

This is a very long, very challenging and very complicated journey we are all on, and no matter what it looks like, we are all trying to do the best we know how, including you. Raise your hand and place it over your heart, and say, "mercy," a number of times. Be willing for at least this moment to be accepting of this being that you have held in judgment for so long.

Another wonderful tool for accessing mercy is the "As Is, I'm Here" practice. Let us explore it now.

An Invitation

After discovering the circle of your breath, say silently to yourself, "As is" (on the in-breath). "As is" is the place of merciful spaciousness, the willingness to allow ourselves to be exactly as we are in this moment. It is the art of letting go of struggling with whatever is (our usual mode), and moving into the release that comes from welcoming it. "I'm here" (on the out-breath) is the willingness to be keenly curious and attentive to *what is*, in a way that invites us into being present with life exactly as it is appearing. As you ride the current of your breath, allow these words to calm your mind and open your heart.

These four powerful words invite us to meet ourselves exactly as we are—the light and the dark, the clear and the confused, the kind and the mean, the acceptable and the unacceptable. It is an invitation to move beyond the continuous struggle to be what we think we should be. This gives us moments, however fleeting, when everything is okay, no matter how it feels. It is the willingness to embrace all the parts of our being so we can receive the nourishment we are hungry for from the source that really matters, ourselves.

A forgiveness practice is also a powerful awakener of mercy. Forgiveness is the art of meeting the unhealed—whether it is in us or in another—with mercy. It is not about letting anyone "off the hook"—it's really not about another person at all. It is rather the activity of letting go of what has closed our own heart.

We have all been betrayed by people, by our body and seemingly by Life itself, but to hold onto resentment, pain and bitterness can only cause us further pain. Just the intention to forgive someone or something that has wounded our heart is a tremendous step into our healing. From that intention, we can then let the process of our lives bring us to a merciful heart.

The roots of reaction and resentment are buried deep in all of our hearts. At times this practice will help us to see how closed our hearts still are and allow us to explore this armoring. At other times it will reawaken us to the spaciousness of an open heart, allowing our ancient pains to float in the healing of mercy.

Much has been written on forgiveness of others and even of ourselves. Very little has been written on forgiving the parts of ourselves that we have hated and feared, keeping us locked out of our own hearts. To forgive a difficulty in our body, a quick temper, and even the Judger itself, mends together the parts that make up the whole of who we are.

After reading the following forgiveness practice, put down the book and allow into your mind a part of you that you most wish would be gone. It could be a part of your body (small chest, big nose), an emotional pattern (rage, self-pity) or a difficult part of your mind (judgment, lust). Start with something that you have touched, for at least moments, with an open heart. If you go straight to that which causes the most contraction, because it will only close your heart more if you are then unable to forgive.

An Invitation

When you have chosen something to forgive, either feel it in your body, see a personification in your mind, or imagine it in a chair in front of you. Say to it, “I am here to invite you back into my heart.” If this brings up rage or fear, tell this part how you feel. Then go on, “I may fear you and even hate you, but even bigger than that is my desire to heal my heart. You have caused me much pain in my life. I am beginning to realize that you are an essential part of the community of my being, and I forgive you.”

As you say these words, breathe this part into your heart. Struggling with it has only generated more pain in your life. “I forgive you for all of the embarrassment, for all of the agony, for all of the upsets you have caused. I now want to allow you back into the healing of my heart. I have grown immensely from your presence in my life, and rather than seeing you as an enemy—as a defect in my being—I realize you come from my soul to awaken my heart. I forgive you.”

See if there is anything else you would like to say to this part, trusting your own heart. When this feels complete, let it go, reminding yourself that no matter what your life looks like, your intention is to heal your heart.

It is also important to ask this part for forgiveness. Every time you put it out of your heart, it receives another load of hatred and fear from you rather than wisdom and compassion. Realizing this, say to it, “I ask you to forgive me for how much I have hated you. Rather than including you as a part of me, knowingly and unknowingly I have sent hatred and violence your way. I ask now that you forgive me for my ignorance, forgetfulness, confusion and rage. I did not see that you were sent from my soul to awaken me. I did not see that it is in letting you back into my heart that we are both healed. I ask that you forgive me for constantly warring with you.”

Into this spaciousness allow this part to speak to you. Like all pain, it just wants to be heard. Be not dismayed if it is rage and hurt that you hear. Most of us have sent great violence into these disowned parts, and, as with all relationships, it takes time to heal. Listen carefully, for there is great wisdom there, and it has been waiting for the opportunity to share it with you. When you are done, thank it for whatever it has said, and let it go. If it does not share with you, touch that with your heart. As you continue to open your heart, it will feel safe enough to share itself with you.

Now include the totality of your being in this forgiveness—the likable and the unlikable, the known and the unknown, the contracted and the spacious, the light and the dark—and say to yourself, “I forgive you,” adding your name at the end of that phrase. “For all of the mis-takes in your life, for all of the reactions of a closed heart, I forgive you _____. I see now that you are an awakening being and every single experience of your life was necessary on the journey. I forgive you.” Allow yourself back into the merciful heart.

If the mind throws up all of the reasons why you can't be forgiven, watch how unkind the mind can be and permit this hard edge to be forgiven. Repeat these words numerous times, allowing them to become your own, opening to a tender, caring relationship with yourself.

Now feel this mercy expanding out to all the people of the world. Imagine for a moment that every single person comes to know the power of an open heart. Imagine men, women and children meeting the unmeetable inside themselves with compassion. Say to everyone, "May all beings know the power of forgiving themselves. May all beings be free from the judgmental mind. May all of us know that in healing our hearts we heal the world.

There may be times when you say "I forgive you" that your heart slams closed in rage at how much agony this part of you has brought into your life. And there will be times when this part is not sure at all about trusting your new intention to heal. The power is in the willingness to at least explore forgiveness. And in those times when you are unable to forgive, you can use that to explore the ancient armoring around your heart. Rather than trying to force your way through, you can shift into forgiving the part of yourself that doesn't want to forgive!

Cultivating mercy, whether it is through the "As Is" meditation or a forgiveness practice is a ray of light in a cloudy, reactive and judgmental world. Even though the heart can close again in a flash and sometimes stay closed for what seems like an interminable time, do not discount the power of meeting the unmeetable, even for a moment, in the healing of the heart.

THE POWER OF NO

Have the courage to say, "No."
Have the courage to face the truth.
Do the right thing because it is right.
These are the magic keys to living your life with integrity.

—W. Clement Stone

There is an important piece we need to touch on to bring this all into balance. To live from the heart is not a passive activity. Too often, because we have lived in resistance for so long, when we look at the heart from a distance, we define it as passive. This perspective translates kindness into "No matter *what* is happening, you smile." It changes compassion into the act of condoning unskillful actions. Nothing could be further from the truth. Sometimes the kindest thing we can do is to say "no."

Go back to the river analogy we explored in Chapter 2. When we use not this to try to fight the current of Life, we are left drained and exhausted. But when we allow the boat to turn around and follow the creative energy of the flowing river, not this becomes a tool for riding the rapids and judgment turns into discernment. It is the paddle that allows for a strong and determined action that keeps us in the main current and out of the backwaters and eddies. Not this, coupled with *this too* allows for creative engagement with the river.

There are no hard and fast rules about when the compassionate heart needs to be soft and tender and when it needs to be fierce. Every single situation will require its own tailor-made response. But it is the heart speaking through the mind that will tell us *what* is appropriate and will allow for full, creative and compassionate engagement.

IT TAKES COURAGE TO HEAL

I believe that man will not merely endure; he will prevail.
He is immortal, not because he alone among the creatures has an inexhaustible voice,
but because he has a soul, a spirit capable of kindness and compassion.

—William Faulkner

It takes courage to meet the armoring around the heart. And it takes courage to learn the art of navigating from the clear light of compassion and mercy rather than the judging and comparing perspective of the unconscious mind. But the rewards are well worth it. After moving through layers upon layers of the armoring around my own heart, I wrote in my journal:

Eons ago, even before remembering,
the doorway to my heart slammed shut—locked, sealed, fettered,
bound and deeply broken.
Slowly, as slowly as a flower appears out of Mystery,
it opened ... and my dry and parched soul blooms in pure joy.
The winds of tenderness now cool me when I am hot
and warm me when I am cold.
And for this I am oh so grateful.

Becoming aware of what the Judger is doing and cultivating the heart brings us to the healing in which the mind drops into the heart. It was once said that the longest 18 inches ever measured is the distance from the mind to the heart. This is the healing that is called for now on our planet, and it is happening in each one of our lives. Our part in the process is to take loving, healthy and wholesome care of the piece of the planet we inhabit. We are living in the schoolroom of the heart, and we will be challenged over and over again to respond with the skills of inclusion rather than to react from the contraction of the comparing, judging mind. To be merciful to ourselves is to heal the world, for all of the violence and greed we see on this planet comes from people whose hearts are closed to themselves and thus closed to their world. As we claim ourselves beyond struggle, we take humanity one more step into the clear and inclusive space of the heart.



May we see beyond our endless need to compare ourselves
to some idea of what we should be.

May we have the courage to meet the unmeetable,
in the healing balm of compassion.

And may we know that each one of us holds within our hearts
the power to heal ourselves and the world.

Core Intention: I'm okay