

## **From Self-Improvement to Self-Acceptance**

For as long as I can remember, I have been trying hard to improve myself. From the age of 5 until I was 23, I was in full-time education and always trying hard to learn so many different subjects – some of which, like Maths, I truly hated. Then in my mid-20s, I began a 10 year journey into psychotherapy which became a long and complex attempt to improve my underlying emotional state and my endlessly problematic close relationships. My interest in psychotherapy then took me into the world of meditation, and then into spiritual awakening, and all the while, I was trying so hard to get everything right so that I would finally be at peace, happy and fulfilled.

Oh and by the way, throughout this time, I was also always trying to improve my appearance. For many years, I almost starved myself so that my stomach did not bulge outwards - which to me epitomised my belief that I would never be physically attractive enough for any attractive man to truly love me. I also spent a lot of money during my 20s and 30s on clothes that I then hardly ever wore in another addictive attempt to feel more attractive.

Maybe, all of us have to go through this long journey of trying to improve ourselves before we finally give up. But I have very belatedly, begun to see that I am fine just the way I am. Now this may partly be down to my age, but it is definitely more than just that. On one level, I think that I just began to notice how exhausting it is to be constantly trying to change or improve one or more aspects of my personality-self. On another level, the quite intense online mindfulness training that I have been doing with the Mindfulness Association UK over the last few months has really helped me to relax more and more into compassionate, self-acceptance moment to moment.

I am sure that a lot of people think that if they were just to accept, or even to love, all aspects of themselves, including all of those parts of their body, their thinking, or their emotions that they do not like, they would be stuck forever in unhappiness. But ironically, it is the non-acceptance, the guilt, and the deep sense of our own unworthiness that keeps us mired in endless misery and dissatisfaction with life.

If deep down someone does not accept themselves or like themselves, let alone love themselves, why would they bother to stop any kind of self-destructive behaviour like drinking or eating far too much? Moreover, those who try to motivate themselves to improve their lives through guilt-tripping themselves, or beating themselves up, just end up feeling much worse than before, even if they push themselves through some punitive type of self-improvement regime for a while.

Before we can let go of any specific habit that is not serving us well, we first have to learn to love and accept ourselves just the way we are. To do this, we do not have to like our weight, or our depression, our panic attacks or whatever. We simply have to say to ourselves, 'This

is what is showing up in my life right now. I will welcome it into my awareness like an honoured guest, even if this particular guest does not make me feel comfortable in my own home.'

For example, suppose you are going about your day and something triggers a big wave of anxiety in you. You can either do your best to try and suppress your panic, or to run away from it by distracting yourself with a big bar of chocolate or large glass of wine. But what about just pausing and allowing the anxious feelings to be there whilst doing your best to soften around them and to soothe yourself? Maybe, you could place a palm or two on your heart or solar plexus, whilst saying something quietly to yourself such as: 'It is OK. This too will pass.' Or maybe you could reassure your panicky self by saying quietly, 'I love you. I have your back.' As you do this, you might notice that the part of yourself that has noticed that you are anxious or upset is *not* anxious at all, but compassionate and kind!

At our core, beneath all our ever changing moods and emotions lies a pure awareness that is always loving and compassionate. Choden (one of the founders of the Mindfulness Association UK) refers to this core aspect of all human beings as the gold that lies hidden under a dung heap. This golden core of ours is always shining with loving kindness and compassion. So when we learn to sit still for a while with a gentle focus on being fully aware moment to moment, we can start to dig gently through the dung until we connect to the gold at our core and go 'WOW!'

The wonderful paradox of being human is that we are all neurotic messes, yet at the same time, we are all so wise and loving, particularly when we learn to soften around the mess, allow it to be there, and connect to the treasure trove of loving kindness deep within us that our neuroses have covered up for such a long time.

So this month, please follow your joy. Spend a lot of time on meaningful activities that bring you deep satisfaction and happiness. But *please do* not do any of these things with any sense of striving to become a better person. You are totally fine and completely loveable just the way you are now, whether you believe this or not, or whether you currently feel joyful and loving, or quite the opposite. Remember that whether your mind is focussed on the dung or the gold, the gold is still there and that your true-self is nothing but gold and thus needs no improvement of any kind.

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