

You're not the Supreme Court

Finding fault with ourselves and everyone else causes fault lines to appear in our world. We split everything up into “good” and “bad,” “like” and “dislike,” “right” and “wrong,” and that creates an unstable, fractured environment in which to live. If there's a constant tension between good and bad, then everyone and everything is either in danger of falling through the cracks or has already fallen.

Check your thoughts. How often do you put a value judgment on people, things, and most especially yourself?

Here's a typical thought stream: “He says to check my thoughts. That seems like a good idea [judgment one]. What am I thinking about now? The idea of judgment. I don't like the thought that I'm judging all the time [judgment two]. I don't think he's right [judgment three]. In fact, I'm sure he's wrong [judgment four]. I'm pretty good at not judging people [judgment five]. But maybe I should do what he says and track my thoughts for a while. There may be some grain of truth to what he's saying [judgment six]. Well, I'm not judging now [judgment seven]. So maybe he's exaggerating [judgment eight]. I think about a lot of stuff and don't judge it. I'm pretty objective, I think [judgment nine]. So where does he get off saying I judge all the time [judgment ten]? Oops, maybe I'm judging him now. I guess I *am* opinionated a lot [judgment eleven]. People have told me that. But so are they, to have said so [judgment twelve]. I'm no worse than they are [judgment thirteen]. Anyway, I'm doing a pretty good job of tracking my thoughts [judgment fourteen].”

You get the idea. My first meditation teacher, Jack Kornfield, asked us to raise our left little finger each time we noticed a judgment. After a few minutes, I just left it up. And thought about how bad I was to judge so often [judgment]. “I'll have to do better [judgment]. But it's clever of me to keep my finger raised [judgment].”

Why do we do this, judge constantly? As we discussed earlier, it's deep in our brain and evolutionary history. We're constantly evaluating both our actual environment and what's in our thoughts for threat. Is this place okay? Is this person okay? Is this imagined scenario okay? If so, we relax and open. If not, we

get ready for fight or flight. This is a basic way we categorize the world, divide it up into good or bad, safe or threatening.

Where does this leave us? Fundamentally anxious, always anticipating a disaster. It keeps us alive – we don't ignore threats – but makes judgment – evaluating everything for its threat potential – our constant mental activity. It's a big, bad world out there.

But is it? Is life really menacing all the time? Or are we being unduly influenced at present by what we evolved from? It was a great evolutionary development for our animal ancestors to check things out before they ventured into the world of predators. And to remember all the places where danger was encountered. To a mouse, there's a lot to be concerned about.

But we don't live with constant physical threat. Yet our brains still scan for it as if we did. In this sense, our brains are working harder than they need to. It's not very likely we'll get eaten on our way to the supermarket.

However, our social interconnectedness and highly developed capacity to imagine the world mentally provide additional and continual possibilities for insult and injury. Our forebears thought, "If I go here, will I find food? Or be it?" We think, "Will I run into a traffic jam on the way to work? Did I forget the flash drive? Is my shirt too wrinkled? What if I don't have enough time to respond to all the emails before the meeting? Will they like my presentation? Should I have made better handouts? I hope they don't notice that I don't have data for 2019. I wonder if that guy will try to disparage me again. Darn, I forgot to call my sister!" We are busy all the time imagining possible scenarios, predicaments, and courses of action. And that involves judging each one. "Good or bad?" "Go or no?"

The consequence of all this judgment of ourselves and others is that we feel bad a lot and make others feel bad a lot. When you say to yourself, "I'm an idiot," you feel like one. When you think, "She's full of it," she picks up on your disapproval. And is hurt by it.

Given the fundamentality and ubiquity of judgment in our thoughts, is there anything we can do about it, and the insecurity, injured self-estimation, and ill will that it creates?

The very latest evolutionary development in our brain is the *prefrontal cortex*. This area has, among other capabilities, the ability to monitor and adjust our thought process. We can listen to what we're saying to ourselves and correct it if need be. We've already taken the first step: noticing how often we're judging. Step two is to modify that tendency. When we hear, "I am no good at getting things done on time," we can add "but this time I will." "The world is falling apart" can become, "This is a time of challenges. We'll grow stronger as we surmount them."

Correcting our thinking to be less final and more process-oriented is very helpful. We move from seeing things as fixed to seeing them as malleable. "It's this way now, but it can be changed." That motivates us to move forward in a positive way, rather than give up.

Another strategy is to just stop generating the judgments. That is, to pay attention to our self-talk and cease it when we start judging. When a judgment begins, just don't finish it.

If you do, immediately reframe it. Either, "That's so..." and then nothing more, or, after having made the judgment, "Another way to look at it is..."

With practice, it becomes easier to hear our thoughts and release or reframe them. The consequences of doing so are quite liberating. Instead of seeing everyone and everything as static, we view ourselves, others, and our environment as dynamic and having the possibility for growth. Rather than feeling fearful and defeated, we're constructively energized.

As a last thought in this chapter, I'll share with you my very favorite Zen saying. This is from "Xin Xin Ming" by Sengstan, the third Zen patriarch, written in the sixth century A.D. "To come directly into harmony with reality just simply say when doubts arise, 'Not two.' In this 'not two,' nothing is separate, nothing is excluded."

In other words, instead of dividing the world into good and bad, we just see that it *is*. Our mind chops things up, sorts everything into categories. But that's our projection onto the world. And it causes considerable insecurity and unhappiness. Reality is what it is, not our opinions about it.

Judgment is valuable in navigating the world, in supporting and preserving life. It needs to be employed judiciously. But there's more to life than living in constant judgment.

