

Be Gentle with Yourself

When we forget who we are, we suffer because we are disconnected from our life essence. Whenever you worry or belittle yourself, you are not connected to your being, to your inner preciousness. Find your being and that inner sense of worthiness and specialness will become obvious. **BY CHARLES SHAHAR**

YOU MAY FIND yourself sometimes being critical about something you have said or done. You may even beat yourself up over it, constantly going over the occasion in your mind, thinking about everything that was wrong about your reaction. Some people do this more than others. It is easy to develop a kind of mental or emotional groove that repeatedly slips into self-criticism or self-doubt.

My question is, would you behave that way toward someone else: constantly putting them down, second guessing or browbeating them? I suspect that most of us find it easier to put ourselves down than to put others down. We may believe in the adage: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." But sometimes the reverse applies even more: "Do to yourself as you would have yourself do to others."

Would you put up with a bully who constantly berates and belittles you? The answer is, probably not for long, if at all. Yet we sometimes put up with an inner bully who pushes us around and reinforces whatever negative thoughts we have about ourselves. How do we stand up to such a bully? Why do we let it happen in the first place?

These are good questions. One approach to answering them would be to dig into our past (mostly our childhood) and find out how we developed such habits of thinking and feeling. This psychological



approach has its merits, but in this article, I want to focus on a more spiritual perspective.

First, I want to examine the concept of non-violence as it pertains to how we behave with ourselves. Next, we shall look at the nature of mistakes and how to approach one's regrets. I then want to examine how important it is to include ourselves in any act of giving. Finally, I want to talk about our innate preciousness and

why we seem so disconnected from the essence of what makes us special.

Practicing Non-Violence

AHIMSA IS THE EASTERN DOCTRINE of non-violence. For most people, the idea of violent behavior revolves around physical violence or aggression. However, violence can take a much subtler form. Shouting at someone, hurling an insult, or uttering a biting or scornful remark are all forms of violence.

Most of us shun violence. Of course, we can occasionally become impatient or lose our tempers, but chances are that we don't consider ourselves as violent types of people. However, we may not be as non-violent as we think.

Violence is not simply about what you do to others, it is also about how you behave toward yourself. Whenever you direct a disparaging thought at yourself, you behave violently. Being unreasonably self-critical is a form of violence. Constantly belittling yourself is also a form of self-violence.

You likely wouldn't accept it if someone was constantly insulting or belittling you, yet you seem to tolerate it when directing such thoughts at yourself. We try to discourage other people from thinking about themselves in such fashions, yet we accept self-violence and even cultivate it.

Whenever you are contemptuous of yourself, stop for a moment and literally consider that you are being violent and cruel. It is not more acceptable to be that way toward yourself than it is to be violent toward others. In fact, it is equally unacceptable.

Self-violence causes wounds; it harms your soul. So, the next time you have a negative thought about yourself, see if you can bring in an opposite sentiment, one of affection and gentleness. Tell yourself that you love who you are, that you are great and quite precious. Repeat it to yourself, many times if you have to. See what kind of difference self-kindness makes.

What Mistakes?

WE ALL MAKE MISTAKES in life. In fact, in a way, our life here is a kind of opportunity to grow, mature, and expand our awareness. Most of how we learn, especially in our younger years, is by trial and error. Mistakes represent a natural part of our growth. Hopefully, we learn from our mistakes and don't commit them again in the future.

The human being is an amazingly adaptable creature. It is this mechanism of adaptation, learning from our experiences, that makes our species so resilient and innovative. Of course, that is an idealized conception. Sometimes we don't learn, and we repeat certain unhelpful behaviors over and over.

All this means very little if you are sitting at home, sulking because you are upset about something you said to your child, or how you handled a situation with your boss. Perhaps you are beating yourself over the head, obsessively going over the event in your mind, looking at it from different angles, all the while re-experiencing the humiliation, disapproval or rejection.

People are often not gentle with themselves about their regrets. You might be telling yourself that you were inappropriate, insensitive, ignorant or foolish. The assumption is that you did something wrong, maybe something awful. Often, this is an exaggerated sentiment, or if it is accurate, the fallout will turn out to be much less severe than expected.

I mentioned that you are here to learn. You have been doing it since the day you were born and becoming aware of your environment. In addition, you might have noticed that human interactions and affairs are complicated. A lot can go wrong at any time. This worldly existence is rarely aligned with our ideals of perfection. In other words, we are bound to make mistakes. It is the nature of the human condition.

Consider that every mistake is an opportunity. A psychologist would say it is an opportunity to learn something and expand your mental tool kit. A yogi or spiritual counsellor might say it is an opportunity to expand your awareness.

In short, there are two types of mistakes: those that you learn from and those that you don't. I would venture to say that if you learned something from a mistake, then it really wasn't a mistake at all. In fact, looking at it quite positively, it was an opportunity to grow as a person and to learn an important lesson in life.

It all comes down to our self-expectations. A perfectionist will be dismayed over any perceived errors that they make. Someone with an overdeveloped sense of obligation will panic when they fall short. Impossible standards and ever-hardening rigidities put a lot of pressure on a person. As a result, they have likely forgotten how to be gentle with themselves.

A new mental groove, therefore, has to be established, one of kindness, patience and

compassion... for oneself. In a way, a mental groove of self-deprecation has to be replaced with one of self-love.

One way of doing this is by employing positive affirmations, repeating a certain thought or verbalization to oneself as a kind of mantra. The mind is a type of mirror that will reflect whatever experiences are placed before it. Why not place positive thoughts rather than constantly directing harsh and negative thoughts towards yourself?

It is not easy to change one's habits of mind. You just have to catch yourself when negative and self-deprecating thoughts intrude. The first step is to be aware of these unwelcome thoughts, and then to affirm (by thinking or vocalizing) the opposite. Don't follow where the negative mind is taking you.

Positive affirmations are remarkably powerful. If you say them with conviction, they will imprint themselves upon your mind and change the very texture of your consciousness.

The Tenth Man

THERE IS A PARABLE in the Eastern scriptures about ten men who were on a pilgrimage to a holy site. They waded through the rough current of a river, and when they reached the opposite bank, the last one counted to make sure that all had reached safely. To his dismay, he found that only nine seemed to have survived the crossing. Alarmed, he then asked the next man to verify his count.

That next pilgrim reached the same conclusion. All of the travellers then counted and found that nine had successfully crossed the river, and they began to grieve for the loss of their companion.

A wise man walked by the scene and asked why the men were weeping. They explained to him that they had started out with ten, but lost a fellow traveller to the river. He then counted and came up with ten. They were amazed. How could they have gotten it so wrong?

He then asked them a critical question: did they count themselves? The answer of course was that they had not, and therefore always fell short of one. The men were relieved and continued with their journey, knowing that everyone was present and accounted for.

What this parable suggests is that we often help others but fail to include ourselves in the equation. We can be generous to others but forget to show the same consideration to ourselves. Whatever the cause we are involved in, we can easily forget that we need to pay some attention to our own well-being.



Perhaps we devote our time and effort to our job, our family or our community. Unfortunately, we don't always get back what we put out. That is why we have to look after ourselves. You might think, "I don't have the time to do something for myself," or perhaps you don't even feel that you are worth it. There is a significant cost to such an attitude.

It is all a question of energy dynamics. People who are chronically putting out energy and rarely getting any back are often depleted, and will ultimately burn out. This has important ramifications for the quality of their life. I have found that leading such a life leaves a person unable to derive enjoyment or pleasure from their existence.

Are you running an energy deficit? Are you putting out much more than you get back? Are you receiving sufficient appreciation, inspiration, support, or enjoyment in return for your efforts? All of these are different forms of (psychic) energy, and they are critically important if you are to remain rejuvenated and fulfilled.

If your efforts and attention are running so much in one direction (job, relationships) that your life energy is being sapped or is running dry, you are living in a self-abusive situation. Check out your life and see if you are running such a deficit. You usually have a choice to change this type of dynamic. It is simply part of being kind and gentle with yourself.

In such a situation, the story of the tenth man takes on added poignancy. The tenth man or woman is your being. By failing to include yourself in the equation, you deny your being the care and attention it deserves. This is not a selfish consideration. A being that looks after

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itself has a surplus of vitality and brightness that it can then share with others.

Know Your Preciousness

FOR YEARS, I HAVE HAD a very special connection with a little girl named Zoe. When she was only a few hours old, I held her in my arms and looked into her eyes. I remember she looked back at me and I could feel her intelligence through her gaze, a sense of depth and connection. Her innate preciousness was so evident to me. It was one of the peak moments of my life.

Fast forward to Zoe's fourth birthday party. It was a bit of a chaotic affair with Zoe and her friends running throughout the house screeching, and generally having a raucous time... until the inevitable happened.

At one point, while running across the living room chasing another child, Zoe bumped against a cabinet, and a glass that had perched precariously on its edge tumbled down and shattered on the floor. Zoe immediately burst out crying. Several people tried to calm her but she was inconsolable.

I finally tried my hand at soothing her. I asked her what the matter was. She pointed to the floor and said, "I broke it." I then replied, "Zoe, I have an important question for you." She asked, "What?" I paused a bit for effect, and then asked her, "What is more important, you or the glass?"

Zoe had to pause for a couple of seconds before she replied, "Me." Then something fabulous happened. She stopped crying and continued to play with her friends as if nothing had happened.

That interaction really had a profound effect on me. I realized that our parents and teachers have never told us what is important in life. They never asserted that what is most important is the being. I am referring to the being in you, and the being in others. What can be more precious than the essence of who we are?

We forget that we are a being. I am not talking about your mind, personality or ego. I am referring to that part of yourself that is aware, that is pure intelligence. I am talking about your essential nature; that remains

"you" when you are asleep, and that, I believe, exists even after your body dies.

The fact is that if you know who you really are, you would not be so harsh on yourself. You would know that you have an intrinsic importance; you are inherently precious. Zoe had that understanding in a flash, and she quickly calmed down because she realized that her being was much more important than an insentient glass or any material form.

How much more important is your being compared to things you fret about? Have you been in touch with your being lately? How often do you simply be? Like most people, we often spend more time ruminating about what has happened in the past, or worrying about what will happen in the future.

When we forget who we are, we suffer because we are disconnected from our life essence. Whenever you worry or belittle yourself, you are not connected to your being, to your inner preciousness. Find your being and that inner sense of worthiness and specialness will become obvious.

How do you find your being? I practice meditation and yoga for this purpose. Meditation fosters a transcendent state where neither positive nor negative thoughts can reach. There is a kind of beatitude experienced in deep meditation where self-doubts and criticisms are dropped altogether.

You can also foster a sense of detachment with a regular practice of meditation. I am not just referring to detachment from the external situations you encounter on a daily basis. I am speaking about developing a detachment from your thoughts: watching your thoughts without getting emotionally identified with them.

Meditation will bring you to the core of your being. When you know who you are, you cannot help but be kind to yourself. 🌸

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