**NOTES AND EXERCISES TO EXPLORE THE INNER CRITIC**

The term 'inner critic' refers to an inner narrative; it is that which judges our behaviour and experiences in terms of being a good or bad person, and punishes and rewards us according to its particular criteria of how we should be (and similarly outwards in our perception of others). It is usually experienced as an inner commentary that is judgemental and demeaning, attacking us, saying that we are wrong in some way, producing feelings of shame, deficiency, and doubt.

It is a major obstacle to the path because according to its narrative we shouldn’t be experiencing what is arising and here in this moment; we should be other than we are. So when we attach to its perspective, we move away from being present to what is arising in the body and mind.

The Buddha referred to the 'fault finding mind' as different to the discernment of and the differentiation between what is wholesome and unwholesome. Recognising the nature of the inner critic supports the mind to be clearer about what is wholesome and unwholesome.

**Recognising** the inner critic is a major first step in separating from this habit of consciousness. It is the comparing, evaluating mind that causes us to doubt ourselves, and shames or belittles us thus bringing a sense of not being good enough. It often comes with the word: ‘Should…’

**Objectify** this voice of the Inner Critic by making its narrative more conscious. We may initially simply notice the feeling of wrongness. Then ask: ‘What am I telling myself?’ to invite it’s voice and message into awareness. It can then help to write the Inner Critic’s comments down. (See Exercise 2 below)

**Compassion:** Notice the pain the Inner Critic causes you. Consider, “Would I talk to anyone else in this way?”

**Kernel of Truth.** There is usually a kernel of truth in what the Inner Critic says that tends to hook us into believing its judgement. But the way it delivers this message is shaming, unkind and exaggerated. For instance, if you felt dull during the meditation, the inner critic naarative might be something along the lines of; “I am a hopeless meditator. Discerning the kernel of truth would be;; ‘Yes, I was drowsy during that last meditation period. That doesn’t mean that I am a hopeless meditator. It just means that I had a sleepy meditation period.’ We drop the judgement, and learn by being curious about drowsiness next time it arises. We acknowledge that experience without needing to banish it or rationalise it. This is how I feel right now: tired or insecure and angry. Whatever it is.

**A more supportive attitude:**

* Start where you are, not where your Inner Critic says you should be, and bring a gentle open curiosity to meet what is here for you in the moment.
* We explore how to be present with the different mind states, bodily sensations and thought patterns as they arise. Learning through the tools of practice what supports our capacity in the moment to be present with and influence these patterns through investigation and recollections. If we have an attitude that is not judging, we are naturally more present.
* We can learn to access a wiser and compassionate guiding quality within our heart/minds. If we pause and consider, we can often know what may be appropriate for us or the other; what may be needed in this moment.

**Doubt and worry**

* Both are close to the inner critic. Recognise uncertainty - allow moments when you don’t know what to do, rather than following the inner pressure to be clear, and notice how that feels in the mind and body.

**FURTHER INQUIRY TO HELP MAKE THE INNER CRITIC MORE CONSCIOUS**

**EXERCISE**

It is helpful to examine the content of what the Inner Critic is saying, how it affects you and why you believe it. Because you believe there is some truth in a judgement, it generates a reaction to your experience. It does not matter if the content of the judgement is true; what is important is that it attacks you: and this undermines your effectiveness, and capacity to be present. It is a harmful pattern of self view

**Exercise**

During the course of one day, notice when the Inner Critic is active, and make a note of the following in relation to at least one attack:

**1)** Write a sentence that describes the incident.

**2)** What is the inner critic saying to you?

**3)** On a scale of 0 - 10 how much do you believe its message to be true. If it is 7 out of 10, for instance, then also consider what the other part of the equation feels like; what does the 3 out of 10 feel like.

**4)** Be curious about why you believe that message. The description of the behaviour may be true, but is the punishment of the judging proportionate or helpful? Would you attack another person in this way?

**5)** What may the Inner Critic trying to protect you from feeling or experiencing? We need to check if we still need to be protected from these experiences, and take small experimental steps outside the limitations the inner critic sets to find out what is true now.

The inner critic is all about rejecting ourselves as we are, and the paradox of practice is that experiencing freedom from suffering happens when we can be completely open and free of any agenda, accepting what is here as it is, and allow ourselves to have the full range of our experience.

We sometimes think we need the judge to badger us to motivate us, but it doesn’’t work. To discriminate and objectively evaluate is one thing, but the inner critic adds a personal put down. Shame and guilt almost never arise except in response to judgement and the inner critic just makes us feel discouraged and disheartened rather than alive and interested.

Instead of believing its judgments, we can notice where we agree with the Inner Critics assessment that something is not okay, and be curious about that. Is that really true now in this moment?

Becoming more conscious of the Inner Critics notions of what’s acceptable and unacceptable helps us to understand what it is trying to protect us from, e.g. feeling vulnerable or fearful.

As we learn to disengage from the inner critic we begin to meet and open to these feelings we have judged and rejected, and we have the opportunity to see in the moment if we still need to protect ourselves from experiencing them. We can explore what our capacity is now to be present with those feelings. As the Inner Critic sees our capacity, it gradually begins to relax.

**personal history with formation of Inner Critic:**

* As a child, our parents had to discipline us and show us how to be in society. They did the best they could, often out of a sense of love, but inevitably also through the filters of their own conditioning.
* For a child, it is its’ emotions and feelings, so when these are disapproved of, the child feels itself to be disapproved of and rejected. A child can’t separate the two, however, as adults we have more capacity to be objective about our feelings.
* As children we internalised standards of right and wrong from our parents and society. Then, the inner critic, by using guilt and shame, urged us to behave and act appropriately according to the moral code we learned. As a child, you had to learn what was required from you in order to be liked and accepted.
* There were certain aspects of you that were seen and appreciated by your parents, for instance, your intelligence, attractiveness, sweetness, obedience, determination. And these became what you believed you should be - an ideal but distorted sense of self on which you unconsciously became fixed.
* The judge then served the survival needs of the child by preventing her from acting in ways that would cause rejection and encouraging her to act in ways that would bring an acceptance. And it does this by rejecting and suppressing those feelings in various ways
* Although striving for the ideal as a child may have brought you parental approval, it did little to give you inner peace; because of the ongoing inner pressure to achieve the ideal.
* In our lives now we want to be seen in particular ways in order to maintain a certain self -image.- nice guy, good Buddhist, kind person etc and the Inner Critic shows up in a number of ways to serve and support these self images:
* **Perfectionist**

• This critic tries to get you to do things perfectly. E.g. it is a running commentary on how you brush your teeth, wash dishes, make the bed, get dressed and so on. As well as setting high standards for the things you produce, and how you perform. It has difficulty saying something is complete.

• It tries to make sure that you fit in and that you will not be judged or rejected.

• Its expectations probably reflect those of people who have been important to you in the past.

**Guilt-Tripper**

• This critic is stuck in the past. It is unable to forgive you for wrongs you have done or people you have hurt.

• It is concerned about relationships and holds you to standards of behaviour prescribed by your community, culture and family

• It tries to protect you from repeating past mistakes by making sure you never forget or feel free.

**Underminer**

• This critic tries to undermine your self-confidence and self-esteem so that you won’t take risks.

• It makes direct attacks on your self-worth so that you will stay small and not take chances where you could be hurt or rejected.

• It is afraid of your being too big or too visible and not being able to tolerate judgment or failure.

**Destroyer**

• It makes pervasive attacks on your fundamental self-worth.

• It shames you and makes you feel inherently flawed and not entitled to basic understanding or respect.

• This most debilitating critic, comes from early life deprivation or trauma.

• It is motivated by a belief that it is safer not to exist.

**Conformist**

• This critic tries to get you to fit into a certain mould based on standards held by society, your culture or your family.

• It wants you to be liked and admired and to protect you from being abandoned, shamed or rejected.

• The Conformist fears that the Rebel or the Free Spirit in you would act in ways that are unacceptable. So it keeps you from being in touch with and expressing your true nature.

**Taskmaster**

• This critic wants you to work hard and be successful.

• It fears that you may be mediocre or lazy and will be judged a failure if it does not push you to keep going.

• Its pushing often activates a procrastinator or a rebel that fights against its harsh dictates.

**Inner Controller**

• This critic tries to control your impulses: eating, drinking, sexual activity, etc. For instance, it shows up as a watchfulness you have over yourself in social situations to make sure you don't look foolish, or do anything inappropriate, or attract attention, or say anything stupid

• It is polarised with an Indulger Part—an addict that it fears can get out of control at any moment.

• It tends to be harsh and shaming in an effort to protect you from yourself.

• It is motivated to try to make you a good person who is accepted and functions well in society.

**Exercise**:

Do these examples resonate with your experience of how your Inner Critic shows up? How does that resonate with your history?

**The various ways we try to defend against these attacks:**

* **Counter-attack:** **fighting back** - throwing the energy back where it came from so that the attack will stop - *blaming* others and rejecting any deficient feelings in ourselves. It doesn't achieve disengagement because the result is an escalation of the interaction - and continued disconnection with our actual experience. Strength or weakness.
* **Rationalising** inan attempt to **justify** or **explain** yourself to **argue** your way out of the judgement,. It doesn't achieve disengagement because what you say never completely answers the judgement. There is always a more perfect answer from the judge just ahead. Right or wrong.
* **Placating or complaining:** opposition is replaced with compliance in an effort to appease the attackerand make the situation okay again.
* These were the responses available to you as a young child in the face of parental judgement, criticism, or threatening demands: fight back, shut out, or give up. Engagement perpetuates your relationship with the past because it results from the belief that you are still that child – dependent on others for security and survival.

### Once we begin to see through some of the beliefs and perceptions we carry of ourselves, because we have been taking ourselves to be this structure and suddenly we are not this structure, some kind of emptiness arises and there is a moment when we do not know what we are. As we start to become more aware of our conditioning and the way it holds sway over our minds, we start to experience some separation. Sometimes we can feel almost lonely without this inner activity. It feels strange and unfamiliar. Often we can feel deficient, uncertain and unsure – as if we are nothing. If that happens, see if you can notice that gap, because we need the space from taking ourselves to be the image**.**

What really helps here is a basic kindness towards ourselves because the Inner Critic can often get very active in these moments of uncertainty, bringing in scepticism and doubt.