

Hi everyone, my name is Zac, and I use he and him pronouns. I'm a white 37 year old male with long medium brown hair that's currently tied back. I'm wearing a black t-shirt and on the breast there's a drawing of a person who looks a bit like Rosie the Riveter seated in a wheelchair. Although it's not visible on my camera, I'm seated in a gray and black manual wheelchair myself. I live with both genetic and acquired disabilities, so I've been disabled my whole life, but I only started identifying as disabled a few years ago.

The last time I talked, I discussed about how doubt can be a hindrance to both yourself and your practice overall in life. But doubt doesn't have to be all bad. There are times when doubt can even be healthy and productive. This week, I'd like to discuss how we can use doubt as an ally to support us, because everything in life is really a both and situation. Doubt can be a hindrance, and doubt can be an ally. For example, if a spiritual teaching doesn't feel right to you, don't feel obligated to take it on.

The Buddha encouraged practitioners to come and see for themselves, meaning that if you try things on for yourself, you'll really learn the depth of the teaching. And if it's not something that resonates with you, you don't have to feel obligated to do it just because the Buddha came up with it or some teacher here or somewhere else told you about it.

Although on initial inspection, This may seem related to the doubt that I talked about last week. This kind of doubt, which is sometimes known as questioning doubt, is not at all a hindrance. Having skepticism about spiritual beliefs is really important. In this case, doubt is an invitation to examine a teaching and see if it applies to our own lives.

This way, we take on a teaching that seems right, and only when we have direct experience with it. We're not just accepting someone else's truth. I may teach something that has great power for me, and it just doesn't resonate with you, and That's totally okay. Doubt also gives us the opportunity to examine our thoughts and our beliefs.

When we bring a sense of inquiry to our thoughts, we can investigate their validity. We can always leave a grain of skepticism in our deeply held beliefs, which allows us for the possibility for new truth.

Conversely, inquiry can also strengthen our beliefs. by examining them more deeply. So it's never bad to take time to examine our thoughts and just give time as to why we believe what we believe.

We often believe our thoughts to be both true and valid. But the truth is that we all have thoughts pass through our minds that we didn't choose to have. Sometimes they don't even align with our values or beliefs. Believing these thoughts without questioning their validity can result in hurting ourselves. And sometimes we can even hurt other people by making assumptions about what they're thinking. And quite often when these, these assumptions are based on some of our own personal feelings.

So someone may look at us a certain way and we may apply some sort of thought to that that's not at all the thought that they're having. We can have uninvited thoughts and beliefs about all kinds of things, but I'd like to focus tonight on thoughts that we have about ourselves. Just keep in mind that these same techniques can be applied to any sort of thought.

There are many reasons that we can have thoughts that are critical of ourselves. Disability is frightening to non disabled society, and although that we're all subject to illness and aging, they try and separate themselves from these realities. They falsely believe that by causing separation between themselves and our disability, that they won't have to encounter it in their own lives.

Although this sense of separation doesn't help them avoid disability, the messaging it creates does have a deep impact on us. Unfortunately, we internalize these messages and end up feeling very separate from society. These messages have peripherated our lives since before we were even aware of them and the damage they do.

Humans brains are already wired in such a way that makes us believe that we're separate from the rest of the collective. These feelings of separation cause vulnerability and feelings of fear. This creates a feedback loop where feeling separate deepens our sense of being separate.

Tara Brach says, "To live in the belief that either I'm bad and wrong, or you're bad and wrong is one cause of suffering". It's not our fault when we believe that is stories, but it does create suffering. Another source of self-criticism is that in our society, many believe that being hard on ourselves will help us to become better.

However many studies have been done that show the exact opposite. Being kind and compassionate towards ourselves makes us better people, while being critical towards ourselves is entirely unhelpful. Here's a quote by Kristen Neff. "Self criticism tends to undermine self efficacy beliefs. Self criticism may harm rather than help our ability to do our best. By constantly putting ourselves down, we eventually begin to lose faith in ourselves, meaning, we're not able to go as far as we're capable of going. Self criticism is also strongly associated with depression. And a depressive mindset is not exactly conducive to a get up and go attitude". End quote.

When we have these thoughts come up, it's often sourced in feelings that are very real. When thoughts are mixed with emotions about ourselves, they can feel very powerful and valid. But there is a difference between the feelings being real, and the thoughts being true. Our thoughts are real because they have weight and power behind them.

We may think to ourselves something like, "I'm not worthy of being loved." What a gut punch, I mean that's such a painful thought. When unquestioned, these thoughts hurt even more coming from inside us than they would from another person even. Our thoughts are very real. And that makes them very impactful. And that's why the second arrow is so dangerous. The Buddha even listed suffering that is caused by our thoughts as one of the three distinct types of suffering.

Just because our thoughts are real doesn't make them true, though. One of my teachers likes to say, "This mind has a mind of its own. You have a choice which thoughts to believe."

In the story of Prince Siddhartha's quest for enlightenment, he was visited many times by Mara, who attempted to prevent him from reaching his goal. Mara tried many times to distract Siddhartha with sensual pressure, violence, and greed. In a final attempt to defeat Siddhartha, Mara asks him, "Who do you think you are? How could you even dare to think that you could become an enlightened being?" Siddhartha counters this by reaching out and touching the earth, an outside witness to his accomplishments.

Mara represents an embodiment of forces antagonistic to enlightenment that exists inside all of us. I had some difficulty grasping the meaning of this story at first. If we consider Mara to be a voice inside Siddhartha, reaching out and touching the earth is symbolic of looking to an unbiased source outside himself for the answer to this question. The fact that Mara's final attempt to beat Siddhartha was by calling into question his worthiness, speaks to how this type of thought is one of the most malicious things that we can do to ourselves.

So, how do we use doubt as an ally against these types of thoughts? One way of dealing with these thoughts is just by repeating the phrase to yourself, "Real, but not true". At the time, you may very well think that the thought is true. And saying to yourself this phrase might be a strain. But it can plant just a tiny seed of doubt. When we start to doubt the validity of these harming thoughts, they don't go away. But when they arise, we're not as taken out by them.

Identifying the thoughts is really important to the problem. Not just having them, but being able to recognize that they're not a valid thought, even if they're based in some very real feelings. After the Buddha became enlightened, Mara still visited him from time to time and tried to sow seeds of doubt. When he arrived, the Buddha would say, "I see you, Mara", acknowledging that he knew what Mara was up to.

Another important step is to call on self compassion. Everybody has these sorts of thoughts. And because we cannot see other people's thoughts, and these types of thoughts are often kept inside, and even felt sort of shamefully about. Giving ourselves the reminder that everyone experiences them is really supportive.

The real part of real but not true is a reference to the fact that these thoughts are based on real, valid feelings. They often have deep hurt behind them. So when you notice yourself having these feelings, give yourself a moment to meet that hurt with compassion.

A third way of dealing with these thoughts is through Byron Katie's four questions. When confronted with doubtful thoughts, Katie asks herself, "Is it true?", "Do I know for a fact that it's true?", "How do I react when I believe that thought?", And "who would I be without that thought?" Let's give this a little try.

Begin by closing your eyes if that's accessible to you. Bring to mind something that you're struggling with in your life and have some thoughts coming up around. When you do an exercise like this for the first time, it's suggested that you don't go into the biggest, most upsetting issue you can think of. It can often be overwhelming to just jump to the most triggering thing. So choose something smaller and more manageable.

Once you've sat with the situation and let the thoughts come up a little, ask yourself the first question. "Is it true?" Your initial reaction might be a resounding yes. Take your time with this. Sit with it for a while and see what comes up for you. There's no right or wrong answer. So just feel out your truth.

If you're lucky enough to answer no, you can skip the second question and move on to question three.

The next question is, "Do I know for a fact that it's true?" I often find myself tripped up by this second question. We don't usually have factual evidence that our thoughts are true. This is especially the case when our thoughts have to do with ourselves or how someone else perceives us. Having that pause allows us to consider the validity of reactive thoughts and feelings. I've had times before where I answered yes to the first question, but when I ask myself the second question, I don't really know for a fact if it's true, and I can't say yes.

Next, we move on to a slightly different line of inquiry. The third question is, "How do I react when I believe this thought?" You might find yourself contracting, thinking less of yourself. You might feel sad, angry, or hopeless. What comes up for you? Another thing to consider is, What do you do in response to this question? Do you lash out? Do you shut down? Maybe you eat a bag of candy? Or indulge in some other thing?

Lastly, ask yourself, "Who would I be without this thought"? Sometimes we can cling so strongly to the real but not true thoughts, and it can start to impact how we see ourselves, and even how we behave. If you were able to tell yourself that this thought is real but not true, and just a thought or feeling with no basis in reality, how does that feel?

Perhaps liberating? Taking this step back from our thoughts and our feelings can create space for us to address the underlying issue. When we're just focused on how we feel about something, it becomes overwhelming and we're just focused on how to deal with our own emotions, which often is an unhealthy way of coping.

Instead, when we investigate what's really going on here, we can look at it if there's changes that we can make. Okay. Okay, everyone. Thanks for listening to me. I hope this gave you some insight to doubt.

May the merit of our practices tonight be for the benefit of all beings everywhere, including ourselves. May we be free of suffering and the causes of suffering. May we know peace and the causes of peace.