

Transforming Habitual Thinking

How do you feel when someone criticizes you? Do you take this personally, thinking that what you are hearing is about you? Do you believe the criticism to be true? What if someone *praises* you – is that easier to receive? Do you take this personally, thinking that what you are hearing is about you? Do you believe the praise to be true? Let's consider how we might transform our thinking about both praise *and* criticism, as part of the path of cultivating beloved community and contributing to social change in our communities.

When you saw the title of this paper you may have thought, "What? How could I possibly ever learn to receive praise and criticism with grace and compassion?" Simply stated (and much more easily said than done, of course), this is possible by developing the capacity to **hear praise or criticism as feedback** that expresses the deeply held values of the person speaking. In terms of praise and criticism, let's say I take out the trash for you, so you say, "you are so awesome," "great job," or "you made me feel so happy!" Or when I forget all about your birthday you say, "you don't care about me," "what a terrible thing to do," or "you make me so angry!" How can I hear these messages differently?

When I hear you say these sorts of things, I think you are expressing something about me, and maybe I believe what you are saying. The first thing I can do to help transform how I hear you and what I think about it is to recognize that **whatever you are saying, it is not about me**. That's right, even though I may be hearing you say what a great partner I am because I took out the trash, or what a terrible friend I am because I forgot your birthday, it's not about me! Anything you say **is all about you**. While my words and actions might serve as a stimulus for your mental and emotional experience, your response is an expression of **what's important to you**, what **stories you tell yourself** about the situation, and, importantly, what **habit patterns** you have developed throughout your lifetime. The main habit most of us have is to **immediately lay credit or blame on someone else for the quality of our own experience**. This is closely followed by creation of a detailed story to back it up and "prove" that we are right – a story which we then unquestioningly believe. This is powerful conditioning and a deep habitual pattern that takes work to unravel. As Pema Chödrön says, "If you think it's hard to give up smoking, try giving up your habitual patterns!"

Cultivating New Awareness

So how do I transform the conditioning and habitual patterns of a lifetime and learn to hear praise and criticism, or *anything* you say, as a heartfelt expression of what is most precious to you? First of all, I could **cultivate awareness of the contents of my thinking** without immediately believing every bit of it to be true. When I acknowledge my thoughts, stories and beliefs and let them just be there, without clinging to them or embellishing them, space arises for me to be curious about what's really being expressed by the words I am hearing. When I **suspend these thoughts and judgments** and just listen to what I'm hearing, I can pay attention to how sad, angry, frustrated, etc. you are, and how much you really value trust, ease, comfort, respect, or whatever else is really alive for you in the moment. Now I'm able to **listen through the story and judgment** to hear what's underneath it, cultivating curiosity about what's precious to you that you are expressing.

Even when I notice and suspend my thoughts and judgments and foster curiosity about what is important to you, I also have my own inner experience of receiving your feedback. So at the same time I am curious about the emotions and values you are expressing with what you are saying, I also **maintain awareness of the quality of my own experience**, which of course is all about me. I stay grounded in the direct experience of whatever I'm feeling by maintaining awareness of my direct physical experience. I could rest my attention on the contact of my feet on the floor or the sensation of breathing in my body, noticing how these practices brings me back into awareness of my direct experience in the present moment.

Sometimes I find it relatively easy to suspend thoughts and judgments, foster self-connection and cultivate curiosity and awareness of feelings and needs. Sometimes it is pretty impossible! For example, it may be easier for me to receive feedback from a stranger than from my partner. I also know that sometimes I have more inner resources available for this work than others. Of course sometimes I will respond in my habitual way, so the best I can do is to come back later, reflect on the situation and imagine how I might have handled it differently.

Receiving Praise and Criticism with Grace and Compassion

So next time you notice you are hearing someone's feedback as praise or criticism, try asking yourself these five questions:

1. Where are my feet?
2. Is this really about me?
3. What stories am I telling myself about this person or the situation?
4. What moralistic judgments (right/wrong, good/bad) am I making about this person or the situation?
5. What precious values are being expressed by this person?

These questions will hopefully help you stay **self-connected**, listen with curiosity **beneath the story** and pay attention to how the outcome might change when you hear praise or criticism as a heartfelt expression of some precious, deeply held value of the other person.

Fostering Self-Responsibility

Once I suspend my judgments, identify my habitual thinking and listen through the story to hear what is important to you, is there more? Yes – **because we are interdependent**, there is still one more step for me to fully receive what you are expressing. While I may be able to hear your praise or criticism as an expression of what's alive for you, I am also involved in it because somehow **my words or actions stimulated this response in you**. So let's take a look at how I can acknowledge that your experience is about you AND take responsibility for the impacts of my words and actions on you.

First of all, I may not always be in a state of being where I can truly hear and see what is important to you, much less take full responsibility for the impacts of my choices. I may be able to do this in stages, or need some support to do this, or it might take coming back later to restore our connection and relationship. However long it takes, and whatever support I need, I want to acknowledge that **everything I do – every thought, word and action – impacts everyone I am connected with**. These impacts range from the subtle, for example believing a thought or judgment about you, to the overt, like when I speak or act based on such a belief. When I foster awareness of these impacts, I move closer to deeply living **interdependence** in my relationships. Interestingly, the single most effective way I can increase my awareness of the impacts of my words and actions on others is by receiving their feedback!

Receiving Praise and Criticism with Grace and Compassion

Ideally, in addition to acknowledging the impacts of my words and actions I want to **express what is important to me related to our interaction**. If I'm receiving praise from you, for example, I might express gratitude and joy that you enjoyed my words or actions, because I really value contributing to the well-being of others. Likewise, when you share a criticism with me, I can express regret and sadness that my words or actions stimulated fear, pain or anger in you, because I deeply value care and consideration for others. Remember **I am not taking responsibility for your experience**, because I did not "make" you happy or excited, angry or sad – **your** emotional responses arise from your inner life and the values **you** hold precious. I am connecting with my **own inner experience** of how my words or actions impacted you, and expressing this to you. Now we have a chance to connect with much more depth and authenticity than "thank you" or "I'm sorry" can convey.

Embodying Interdependence

Finally, here is a description of the full practice of *Receiving Praise and Criticism with Grace and Compassion*, which we could also call **Embodying Interdependence**:

1. I say or do something that stimulates a response in you.
2. Prompted by your experience, you say something to me that I initially hear as praise or criticism.
3. I take a deep breath, place my attention on my feet, and notice what's happening in my mind. Today I am capable of letting go of my thoughts, suspending my judgments, and listening through your words for what is precious to you.
4. I make some guesses about this life in you, get feedback about their accuracy, and make some more guesses. At some point you trust that I get you.
5. I acknowledge the impacts of my words or actions on you and tell you my experience when I hear from you about these impacts. I let you know what is precious to me and how my behavior impacted **my** values.

This, of course, is not the only way to respond to praise or criticism. We all do the best we can in every moment, given our conditioning and the inner and outer resources we can access. My aspiration is to **embody interdependence** in every moment by taking responsibility for the quality of my own experience and cultivating curiosity about the impacts of my choices on others.