



Self-Acceptance

How do you overcome inclinations towards self-criticism? Nancy Jackson (Swami Dayananda) offers hard questions of self-discovery that can help you shift your own thinking.

Isn't it strange that self-acceptance is so challenging? You are your most constant companion. For every decision you've made, every feeling you've had, and every day you have lived, you have been there with you.

Yet, other people seem to do some things so much easier, or better. Other people are more clever or more lucky. They get better breaks, or are thinner, or taller, or smarter. Until something happens and you're glad you aren't that other person. Then you are happy to be you.

Why do we think we want to be different than we are? Do we believe another person doesn't have challenges or setbacks? Do we imagine that the road not taken was the road to happiness?

Surprisingly, self-acceptance is something virtually everyone struggles with. It is on the surface yet also deeply felt, constant yet unpredictable. As each of us matures, we are able to absorb and embrace our many experiences. You probably already carry the confidence of self-acceptance. But if you find you still have a tendency to

reprimand yourself, you might want to investigate further.

COMFORTABLE WITH WHO YOU ARE

What you think about yourself is core to self-acceptance. One of the fundamentals of yoga is the recognition that you are more than the body-mind. Yet, contemporary culture readily defines us by physical appearance, money, accumulation of items, education, work, and what kind of car we drive.

From childhood, each of us builds an identity based on our situations and skills. For example, a child who loves dancing may be encouraged to dance and becomes identified as the one who dances. Or the teenager who's good at fixing things might volunteer or be called upon to tackle mechanical or technical challenges.

Identities are also formed by tendencies. These might be the inclination to flare-up or succumb to worry, to be independent or seek reassurance.

As we mature, we add values to our identities. Some are from our family and those surrounding us,

and some are our own. These might be principles, such as being reliable or trustworthy; or qualities, such as being cool or warm-hearted. They can also be relational identities, such as feeling cheated or being a leader. We identify with our attitudes, associations, knowledge, moods, problems, and life events. Sometimes turning points shift identities, such as when someone goes away to school, travels abroad, takes a job, or joins the military. Having children can shift identity.

Along the way, we become attached to what we like and don't like about ourselves. You might like being generous but not like being vain; you might like being competitive but not like being jealous. All of these contribute to what you think about yourself.

A MAP OR A TRAP?

Labelling ourselves isn't necessarily a problem. There's nothing wrong about identifying with a characteristic or a career path. The problem is maintaining a label that doesn't fit or is exaggerated. We place ourselves into categories and work

hard to keep ourselves there. Then disappointments arise when the world doesn't support the identity. We become sandwiched between what is and what we imagine is supposed to be.

What happens when someone affirms what you think about yourself? Perhaps you have a tendency to explore many points of view on the same topic. If someone comments that you are fair-minded, you agree. What about when they think of you differently than you think of yourself?

Have you ever had the experience of being accused of something you are certain you are not? Like "he's always late," when you rarely are late. Or, "she spends too much on clothes" when you only have the one dress outfit. This affirmation-challenge goes on all the time. If your

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identity is affirmed you feel on the right track. If it is challenged you can be affronted.

Your ideas about yourself can enhance your life and lead to more positive experiences. When you remember you have a personal history of learning skills, meeting new people, or taking on challenges, you create a pathway of possibilities. Recognising mistakes adds to your overall experience and enriches your life.

But when you have allow disappointments to accumulate they become a block that leads to giving up, considering yourself a failure, or not trying something because "it never works out." This crushes self-acceptance and zaps you of the energy to be open. Self-acceptance isn't something to postpone until you are perfect, or once you have gotten

into that exercise regime or diet, or acquired a partner or a better job.

Perhaps you can take a moment to reflect on how your identity has changed through the years. From being young and going to school to different work situations, maturing, and taking on responsibilities. Which are the characteristics and tendencies you like? Which are the ones you would still like to temper or change? If a news reporter were to appear with a camera and microphone, how would you describe yourself?

LOOK CLOSELY

When you are self-accepting you're able to embrace all facets of yourself, not just the positive. But self-acceptance doesn't give you free rein to indulge. For example, "I'm sarcastic—I can't help it." Or, "I'm just lazy." Self-acceptance is also self-evolution.

You acknowledge your limitations while working towards tempering your wearisome tendencies. You like yourself yet also strive towards deeper understanding. Gentle guidance towards acceptance is far more fruitful than putting yourself down.

The key is observing yourself as closely as the words of your own thinking. Once you discover your patterns you know more clearly what you're working with.

A great place to observe your thinking is in yoga class. Perhaps you had to overcome resistance just to get to class. Do you judge yourself harshly? If you do, it will show up as inner criticism, such as whether you believe your movement or stance is perfect enough. Or being frustrated that you can't meet your own standard. Sometimes you can simply be discouraged that your body can't quite do what you'd like it to do. It is worthwhile to question these judgments. It could be that you need to back off and be more gentle.

Now consider the times when you simply follow the teacher's

instructions. You bend, you twist, you breathe, you let go, you hold—and you simply stay present. Today you can make the maximum effort and tomorrow you may need to pull back a little. Every body is different and every body has its physical challenges.

Just as in virtually any endeavour, through repetition and practice, you learn skills. You improve your flexibility, strength, and focus. With that comes self-acceptance.

USE THE SIGNALS

You might want to notice your inner monologue when you are holding a posture, or during relaxation or meditation. Here your mind might review current events in your life. Does it bring forward your shortcomings? Do you pressure yourself by thinking you could have done something better or could have said something different?

It's often difficult to separate from your emotional state of the moment. Language itself encourages us to become one with our feeling. Most likely you've heard many times phrases such as "I'm angry," "I'm excited," "I'm depressed," rather than "I feel angry," "I feel excited," or "I feel depressed." When you recognise it's a feeling, it's easier to accept your wide range of emotions.

Frustration, emptiness, resentment, disappointment, fear, and grief are all clear signals to listen carefully to what you are telling yourself. The cause is the thinking behind it. The great yogi Patanjali tells us: "Of the various thought-waves, some are painful and some are not painful."

One guideline is to tune into the uncomfortable feeling associated with pointing out what you consider your faults. You might think that it is the conflict of trying to fix your fault. More likely, that tension is because the thinking itself is untrue or unnecessary. Severe criticism hurts and creates limitations. Byron Katie, a well-known teacher of self-

inquiry says, "Pain is the built-in discipline that lets you know your thinking is off."

It also is a brilliant method of self-inquiry. Consider your conflicts. In what areas of life do you experience

yourself, "What is this about?" "Do I want something to be different than it is?" "Am I working too hard to maintain my identity?" With as much honesty as you can, ask yourself if you are trying to rewrite

get cracking. Let the struggle be with the work rather than fighting the resistance or the sabotaging comments. Develop and draw on your attributes of perseverance, commitment, and patience.

Self-knowledge recognises that the source of your happiness lies deeply within. Inherently we know that we are more than our personalities, experiences, tendencies, or relationships.

Consider inviting acceptance into your life. When you notice your mind is self-critical, ask if you can take some action. If not, try to resist that train of thought. Some things about yourself you will never be able to change and some things you can work on. You know that you already do your best. Let that be enough.

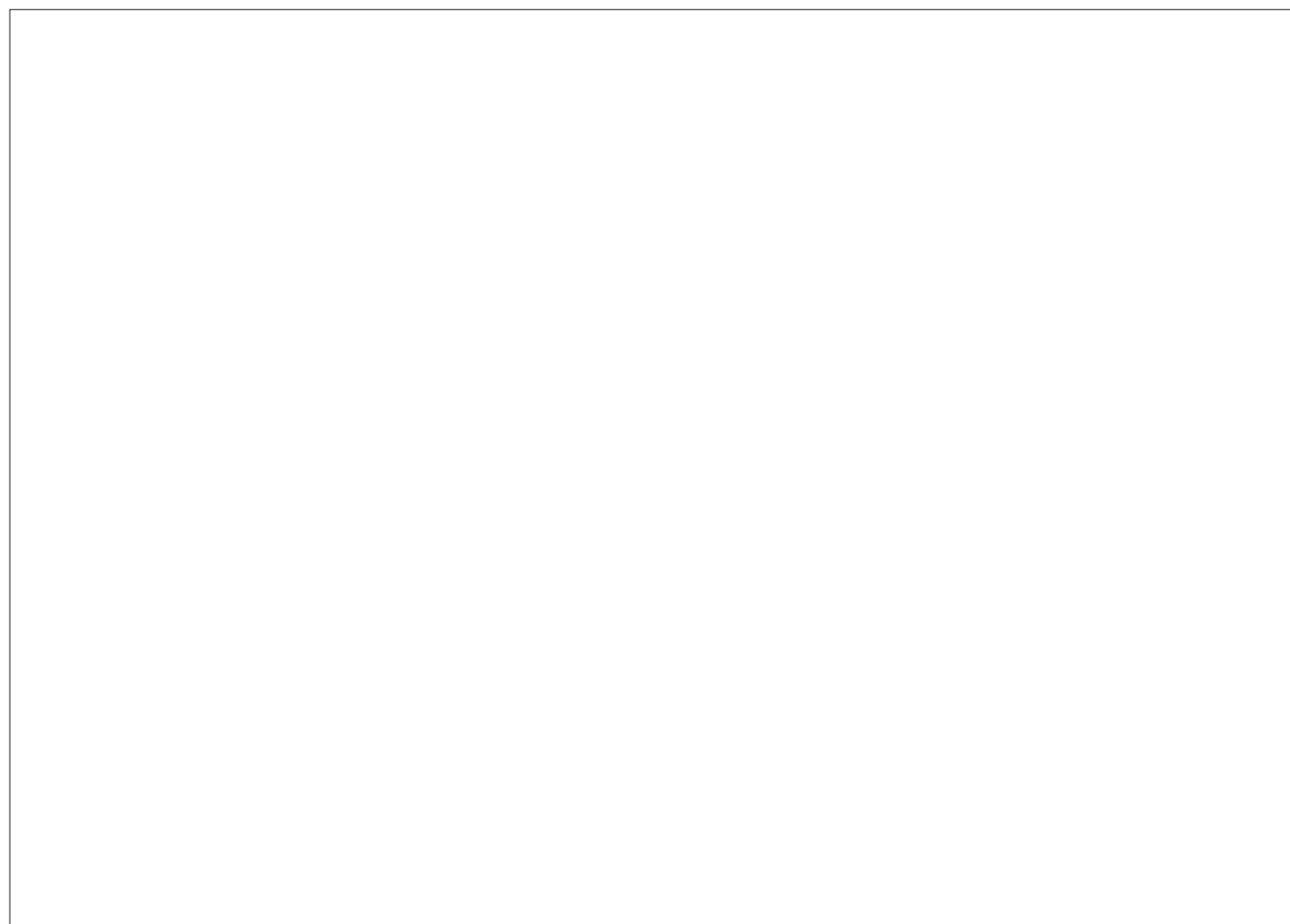
the most conflict between what is and what you think should be, such as your physical body, relationships, or working with your own mind. If you can, clarify your conflict and say, "I am not accepting of this."

your own history. Are you reviewing your book of wrongs or mistakes?

In a positive way, perhaps you are pining. Maybe you haven't had time to pursue a favourite interest. Not using your skills or talents brings stress. This kind of conflict leads you towards resolution to

THE LIGHT OF SELF-KNOWLEDGE
The yogic scriptures take self-acceptance to the deeper level of self-knowledge. Self-acceptance is embracing who you are as a human being. Self-knowledge recognises that the source of your happiness

Whenever you can identify this tension you might want to ask



lies deeply within. Inherently we know that we are more than our personalities, experiences, tendencies, or relationships. The spiritual foundation is the light of consciousness itself.

Meditation is the practice of listening to the mind and allowing it to run quiet. Beyond the chatter is an ocean of tranquillity that is the essence of pure being. And that aspect is easy to embrace. The Buddhist teacher Pema Chodron says, “Gradually, through meditation, we begin to notice that there are gaps in our internal dialogue. In the midst of continually talking to ourselves, we experience a pause, as if awakening from a dream. We recognize our capacity to relax with the clarity, the space, the open-

ended awareness that already exists in our minds. It feels like stepping out of a fantasy world and discovering the simple truth.”

Some of the great streams of self-inquiry from the Upanishads remind us, “Who is doing the asking?” “Who is listening to the mind?” “Who is in the mirror?” The Yoga Vashishta says, “The light of self-knowledge alone illumines all experiences. It shines by its own light.”

Self-acceptance allows you to release yourself from what you assumed was your fault. It opens energy to receive. Each of us can enjoy as much happiness as we can hold. Maybe contemporary life asks us to fit in. We can be

accepted by others in the same way we accept them. But perhaps more important is to allow ourselves to be quirky or conservative, impulsive or consistent, adventurous, quiet, wild, or peculiar. It’s about being authentic and unique.

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Towards kindness

No matter how sympathetically you treat yourself, it’s still easy to fall into self-criticism. When you need a lift, try some of these suggestions.

- Share your feelings. Other people also have times of doubt, turmoil, uncertainty, and despair. When you communicate your thoughts you find clarity and understanding. Whether it is among friends, co-workers, or with a psychologist, you might find that in expressing your fears and secret thoughts you are not alone.
- Bookmark your best qualities. Focus on your skills, your good tendencies, the successes you’ve had, and the strengths forged from trying times.
- Bring positive feedback into your life. Your support system is comprised of people who accept you and believe in you as you are. Spend time with people you

appreciate and ask for more good people to come into your life.

- Listen more carefully. Too often we hear the negative more than the positive. Retune your hearing for better balance.
- Dissolve regrets. You can never know that life would be better for anyone involved if the past was different. The more you review regrets, the more power they have. Keep in mind that a regret is just a thought.
- Quiet the inner critic. Self-criticism is a habit. If you have a running commentary of negativity, tune to a different inner radio station. If you give it attention it gets louder and more obnoxious. When you don’t listen, it disappears.
- Acknowledge challenges. You’ve met countless challenges before. Some have worked out well and some haven’t. Focus on the positive outcomes and don’t be limited by

things that didn’t work before.

- Get some perspective. It’s too easy to focus on petty events and conversations. Rather than struggling, step back and let life flow. Open yourself into the bigger picture.
- Approve of yourself. One of the most difficult hurdles to self-acceptance is worrying about what other people think of you. It’s a particularly insidious aspect of today’s culture. Our socialisation requires us to conform but you can choose how much. When you can, be vigilant about seeking approval and ask about your own motivations.
- Focus on the uplifting. A classic inquiry technique is to ask yourself: “Does this thinking bring me more agitation or more peace?” And go towards the peace.