



Judgment Calls

Often, we blame ourselves or others when situations make us feel uneasy. But if we learn to discern rather than judge, we begin to see our difficult feelings for what they really are. ~ By Sally Kempton

Judgment is like cholesterol: There's a "good" kind and a "bad" kind. My friend Angela calls the good kind of judgment "discernment." She calls the bad kind "the enemy of love." "It doesn't matter what situation I go into," she once told me while suffering through a spell of the bad kind. "I can always find something wrong with it. If it's not the weather, it's people's clothes or the way they're talking. Whatever it is, I hate it." You can't win with your inner judge: It even judges itself for judging.

Sometimes that judgmental state feels like a sword driven right into the delicate fabric of your consciousness. Any feelings of love or relaxation or peace that you might have been nurturing are chopped to bits. Whether you're judging others or yourself, it's impossible to aim negative judgments in any direction without experiencing the sharp edges of judgment within yourself. Doubly so, in fact, since the faults we judge most harshly in other people usually turn out to be our own negativities projected outward.

Linda, a gifted and intelligent woman, has a rebellious streak that she's been trying to suppress for years. When she was in graduate school, she was caught shoplifting and nearly lost her job as a teaching assistant. In later years, she liked to engage in sexual brinkmanship—intense flirtations with much younger men, many of them her students. Nowadays, she prides herself on her ability to spot hidden lawlessness in others. She once drove a colleague out of her teaching position by spreading rumors about the colleague's affair with the father of a student. She'll say, with a straight face, that her sense of purity is so powerful that it will always point out the impurity in the people around her. It doesn't seem to occur to her that the "impurity" she sees in others mirrors behavior she rejects in herself.

Toxic Judge

Of course, I'm being judgmental here, and what's more, taking a certain satisfaction in it. That's the problem: Unleashing our inner judge can give us a quick hit of superiority. We feel smart when we can wield a skillful insight or pinpoint our parents' mistakes or the pretenses of our friends, teachers, and bosses. Moreover, judgment fuels passions—a sense of injustice, sympathy for the underdog, the desire to right wrongs. It gets us off the couch and into action. For many of us, judgment and blame are a kind of emotional caffeine, a way of waking ourselves from passivity.

Recently, I was leading a group exercise to dissolve negative emotions in meditation. One participant worked with her judgments about the Iraq war and then shared that when she examined the energy inside those feelings, she could feel its toxicity. Judgment, she realized, could actually make her sick. "The problem is," she said, "that I don't know how I'll generate the passion to do my political work without those feelings of judgment."

It's a good observation, and one that every one of us who decides to work through judgmental tendencies has to address. After all, the critical intellect is indispensable. The absence of critical feedback is what creates tyrants, dictators, and bad decisions. Without discernment, we mistake emotional heat for real love, and states of mindless trance for meditation. Discernment—or viveka, as it's called in Sanskrit—is also the quality that will ultimately



allow us to make the subtle spiritual decisions about what we truly value, what will make us happy, and which of our many competing inner voices are important.

So how can we discern when something is wrong without being judgmental, without disliking the perpetrators, without filling ourselves with negativity? How can we change our own difficult personality traits, our fears and tensions and resistances, without judging ourselves for having them? Is it even possible to eliminate the bad kind of judgment without losing the good kind?

Ego Mania

Despite the tendency to confuse judgmental blaming and discernment, they have as little to do with each other as dogs and cats. In fact, they come from entirely different levels of our psyche.

According to traditional yogic psychology, discernment is a quality of the buddhi, a Sanskrit word that is sometimes translated as “intellect” but that really refers to the higher mind, the seeing instrument that our inner Self uses to observe the play of our inner world and make decisions about what is and is not of value. Discernment is an awareness, often wordless, a clear insight that is prior to thoughts and emotions.

Judgment and blame, on the other hand, are products of the ahankara, usually called the ego, that part of the psyche that identifies “me” with the body, personality, and opinions.

Ego has its uses—after all, if we could not create a bounded sense of “I,” we would not be able to engage as individuals in this fascinating game we call life on earth. The problem with ego is that it tends to extend its portfolio, creating structures that block our connection with the joy and freedom that is our core. When that happens, we find ourselves assuming what can be called the false self.

Not to be confused with our natural personality (which, like the structure of a snowflake, is simply the unique expression of our personal configuration of energies), the false self is a coping mechanism. Usually devised in childhood, it is a complex of roles and disguises cobbled together in response to our culture and family situation. The false self claims to protect us, help us fit in with our peers, and keep us from feeling naked in a potentially hostile world, but it actually functions like badly fitting armor. Because our false self is fundamentally inauthentic, we often feel clueless when we’re inside it, as if we’re getting away with something and at any moment will be unmasked.

Blame Game

Blame is one of the smoke screens that the false self throws up to keep itself from facing the pain of our human fallibility. Blaming, like anger, creates drama, movement, action—it is, as politicians know, one of the greatest of all diversionary tactics. If you look at what happens inside you when you feel unhappy, confused, or threatened by a situation, you may be able to catch the moment when blame arises.

First, there is the discomfort, the sense that something is wrong. The ego doesn’t like unpleasantness, so it squirms, looking for a way to avoid the feeling. At this point, we start to explain to ourselves why we feel uncomfortable and to look for a way to fix it. Often we do this by looking for someone or something to blame. We may blame ourselves, thus creating guilt. We may blame someone else, feeling like a victim or perhaps like a hero coming to the rescue. We may blame fate or God, which usually creates a feeling of nihilistic despair. In any case, we create a screen to separate ourselves (at least momentarily) from the discomfort.

Warning Signal



The irony is that if we could let ourselves feel the discomfort without assigning blame, that very discomfort would connect us to our real source of wisdom and strength. The feeling that something is wrong is actually a signal. At the deepest level, it's a direct communication from our authentic Self. If we can catch our feelings when they first arise—before we start to assign blame, find fault, or judge—they will often give us the information we need to understand any situation. Not only that, but when we acknowledge feelings of discomfort without trying to escape them, we automatically put ourselves back in touch with our authentic Self, which is the source of real discernment.

Of course, when we've pushed away our feelings for a long time, they become hard to recognize and even harder to interpret. That's why it so often takes a crisis, a meltdown, to get the false self to abandon its defenses long enough to hear the messages our feelings want to give us.

Fault Lines

When I was in my early 20s, I was a journalist and married to a man who worked in the film business. Making films involves months of 18-hour days, often in strange places, and since my profession was theoretically portable, it seemed to make sense that I travel with him. In practice, however, that meant I often found myself sitting in a hotel room waiting for my husband. I hated the powerless feeling this gave me, but at the same time, I was too emotionally dependent on my husband to stay away. In my conflicted state, I would pick fights, and the fights would escalate, and eventually we would find ourselves locked in a struggle to prove each other wrong.

One day, I had to leave for an interview right in the middle of a particularly intense argument. Megawaves of anger were running through me, and even worse was my confusion: The issues behind the conflict were so murky that I couldn't figure out which one of us was wrong!

But I didn't have time to obsess about it; I had to do the interview. I watched myself slip out of the emotions that were consuming me and into my professional self. As I considered the questions I was going to ask, I actually forgot about my anger.

When my interview was over, I noticed that I was still standing outside my anger. At that moment, I realized I had a choice. I could reenter the zone of anger, the zone of he-did-this/I-did-that, or I could stay in this zone of relative objectivity.

I chose objectivity. I asked myself, "Why does it matter so much that you be right?" Almost immediately, an answer arose: "Because I don't believe that I can change. So if I admit a mistake, it's like admitting that I'm permanently flawed."

"Why is that so terrible?" I asked.

There seemed to be no answer to that question—only feelings of fear and despair. Those feelings felt huge, primal. As I let myself feel them, I saw that in some way, they were controlling my life and that I didn't want to live inside those feelings anymore. Whatever it took, I knew I had to pull myself out of that swamp of pain.

That realization was a true turning point in my life. In hindsight, I'd say it marked the beginning of my inner journey, starting a process of self-questioning that led me, two years later, into meditation. At the time, though, the most immediate result was a feeling of compassion for myself and my husband. There was no longer any question of blame; we were just two human beings struggling to stay together while moving in nearly opposite directions. My problem, I saw, was not him. It was the fact that I was out of touch with my real self.



Over the years, as meditation and inner practice have made me familiar with my own ground, it's become much easier not to blame. That choice is always there presenting itself, of course. When the feeling that something's wrong surfaces, I can let the discomfort propel me into the old scripts ("Whose fault is this? What have I done wrong? How can people act this way?"). Or I can stop, recognize the discomfort as a signal to pay attention, and ask "What am I supposed to understand here?" If I take the first road, I inevitably find myself saying or doing something that comes out of my ego's fearful need to prove itself right. The result is often painful and always ineffectual. If I take the second road, I experience a clarity that lets me act intuitively, that seems to come from beyond my personal self. When I act with discernment, it's often because I've resisted the tendency to blame.

Channel Changer

So, if you want to switch channels from blaming to discernment, start by paying attention to the feelings that arose right before you started the blame spiral. Find out what they have to show you.

Think of it as a process of retracing your footsteps. When you find yourself blaming, ask yourself, "What feeling started all of this?" Be patient, because it might take a few moments to become aware of the feeling, but when you do, let yourself stay with it. Then turn inside and ask, "What perception lies behind this feeling? What is this feeling telling me?" The perception might be something totally unexpected—an insight into yourself, a realization about a situation. You might see that it's time to act in a situation that you've been letting slide, or that you need to stop struggling and let a problem resolve itself on its own.

After you've sensed an answer, look again. Notice whether the perception you are experiencing feels clear or whether it's another layer of the judging mind. The way to do this is to notice the feelings around your perception. If you still feel confused, angry, self-righteous, unhappy, overexcited, or full of desire or any other hot or swampy emotion, you're still judging. In that case, ask yourself, "What is the root perception behind this? What does this feeling really have to tell me?"

If you stay with it, this process of self-inquiry can give you practical solutions to situations in your life. It can also shift your inner state quite radically. Real discernment, I've always found, starts with the willingness to ask questions. If you keep asking those questions, you will often get to the place where there are no answers at all, the place where you are just...present. Judgments dissolve in that place. Then you don't have to strive for discernment; discernment is as natural as the breath.

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