

Our Relationship with Ourselves

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I had a best friend once who was with me all the time. We were basically never apart and did everything together. And we kept no secrets from each other – he knew everything about me. But once we hit a certain age, our relationship changed. I think he meant well. I think he was trying to help me, because it started with him encouraging me. If I was doing the school cross country, he would be right there with me and say things like “come on, you can do better than this, push yourself. You’ve got more in the tank.” When I did well at things, like when I got back a really good test score, he would say things like: “Yeah not bad – 90% is good, but what about the other 10%. 100% would have been better. I think someone else in the class has probably got 100%.” And it basically went downhill from there.

He started to get really critical. When he saw me with my top off, he’d say things like, man you’re chubby, you need to lose weight, or, look how skinny your calves are, you’ve got chicken legs. After a while it got really bad. We would be walking around school and for reasons I still don’t understand, he would say stuff like: “Man you are a loser. People think you are weird. I don’t think anyone actually likes you.” He was quite abusive. And yet I never thought to tell him to shut up, or to leave me alone, or even challenged what he said. I just accepted it as if it was the truth. And so I put up with this abusive relationship for years and years, while my self-esteem got worse and worse, and I became more and more depressed.

I had to go pretty low before finally, one day, when I was really at the bottom, things finally changed. I vividly remember being in a bathroom, standing in front of a mirror and he looked straight at me and said: “I’m sorry for tearing you down all the time. I’m going to change and I’m going to start being on your side.” It was quite an emotional moment.

There was only one person in the bathroom, though. Because my best friend, who had turned into my worst critic, was me. It was the way that I spoke to myself.

The interesting thing about our first pillar: “Being at ease with our inner self” is that it highlights the fact that we have a relationship with ourselves. We talk to ourselves and make judgements about ourselves all the time. And most of the time we are completely unaware of it. Our relationship to ourselves is unconscious. Often, this relationship can become unhealthy and abusive, and can lead us to becoming depressed or anxious. Maturing as a person means becoming aware of this relationship, and ensuring that it is a healthy one. For most of you, just being aware of the way that you talk to yourself is all that is needed to make a healthy change.

The recognition of this inner self, and the ability to begin to go beyond it, to realise that there is a true self that is deep within you, and this other self that you have constructed, is the beginning of the spiritual journey.

Eckhart Tolle, the spiritual teacher and author of the classic self-help book: “The Power of Now” tells his story right at the start of the book, of how he came to have that realisation. He explains it

so well, and the describes the kind of awakening that can happen when we have that realisation, that I would like to read quite a long excerpt from his book.

He says:

Until my thirtieth year, I lived in a state of almost continuous anxiety interspersed with periods of suicidal depression. It feels now as if I am talking about some past lifetime or somebody else's life.

One night not long after my twenty-ninth birthday, I woke up in the early hours with a feeling of absolute dread. I had woken up with such a feeling many times before, but this time it was more intense than it had ever been. The silence of the night, the vague outlines of the furniture in the dark room, the distant noise of a passing train – everything felt so alien, so hostile, and so utterly meaningless that it created in me a deep loathing of the world.

The most loathsome thing of all, however, was my own existence. What was the point in continuing to live with this burden of misery? Why carry on with this continuous struggle? I could feel that a deep longing for annihilation, for nonexistence, was now becoming much stronger than the instinctive desire to continue to live.

“I cannot live with myself any longer.” This was the thought that kept repeating itself in my mind. Then suddenly, I became aware of what a peculiar thought it was. “Am I one or two? If I cannot live with myself, there must be two of me: the ‘I’ and the ‘self’ that ‘I’ cannot live with.” “Maybe,” I thought, “only one of them is real.”

I was so stunned by this strange realization that my mind stopped. I was fully conscious, but there were no more thoughts. Then I felt drawn into what seemed like a vortex of energy. It was a slow movement at first and then accelerated. I was gripped by an intense fear, and my body started to shake. I heard the words “resist nothing,” as if spoken inside my chest. I could feel myself being sucked into a void. It felt as if the void was inside myself rather than outside. Suddenly, there was no more fear, and I let myself fall into that void.

I have no recollection of what happened after that. I was awakened by the chirping of a bird outside the window. I had never heard such a sound before. My eyes were still closed, and I saw the image of a precious diamond. Yes, if a diamond could make a sound, this is what it would be like. I opened my eyes. The first light of dawn was filtering through the curtains. Without any thought, I felt, I knew, that there is infinitely more to light than we realize. That soft luminosity filtering through the curtains was love itself. Tears came into my eyes. I got up and walked around the room. I recognized the room, and yet I knew that I had never truly seen it before. Everything was fresh and pristine, as if it had just come into existence. I picked up things, a pencil, an empty bottle, marvelling at the beauty and aliveness of it all.

That day I walked around the city in utter amazement at the miracle of life on earth, as if I had just been born into this world.

For the next five months, I lived in a state of uninterrupted deep peace and bliss. After that, it diminished somewhat in intensity, or perhaps it just seemed to because it became my natural state. I could still function in the world, although I realized that nothing I ever *did* could possibly add anything to what I already had.

Perhaps not many of you will ever have an experience like Eckhart Tolles. But his experience is very much like one of my own that I had around the age of 16: a spiritual awakening. I have still spent many years working on my relationship with myself after that awakening, but it showed me that once we can be freed from our slavery to our minds, there is a greater existence that is possible. For some reason, we often need to really come to the end of ourselves to find it.

And this is the heart of the Easter message, and the heart of all spiritual traditions: that when we can let go of our smaller, finite self, there is a more real, more peaceful, more alive existence on the other side of that death to self.

But the least you can do is recognise that there is an inner voice with which you talk to yourself. See if you can notice it throughout the day. See what kind of voice it is. If it's not nice, or if you have an abusive relationship with yourself, then why not change that. Because nobody needs a friend like that.