

Five Keys to Releasing Self-Judgment

CHRISTOPHER M. KISLING



INTRODUCTION

Judging ourselves is one of the easiest and most reflexive things we do, with the most profound and pervasive consequences for our sense of comfort and peace. It can be so automatic, in fact, that it can feel "natural." It becomes part of the texture of our lives, like a chronic pain that we get used to.

Judgment is the practice of assigning values of good/bad and right/wrong in response to the many different inputs of all kinds that cross our paths or enter our consciousness in the course of a day—people, events, phone calls, news, thoughts, feelings, impulses, memories, sermons, arguments, the number on the bathroom scale, the reflection in the mirror, etc.

When we speak of judgment in this way, we're talking primarily about our tendency to judge things as bad/wrong, since that's the chief source of our moment-by-moment internal discomfort. Within this context, **self-judgment** would be the practice of evaluating oneself negatively, crystallized in that all-too-common question, *What's wrong with me?*

It's one thing to assess the stream of inputs or stimuli in terms of how *useful* they seem to us or in the light of our personal preferences—i.e., *what we want*. However, once we cement the habit of placing them--and ourselves--on the moral grid through the use of good/bad and right/wrong classifications, we've begun to play a game with much bigger stakes. We begin coloring our world with crayons that have a hard time staying inside their intended lines.

The poet David Whyte wrote insightfully that "When your eyes are tired the world is tired also."¹ Similarly, when your eyes are accustomed to judgment, your whole world is colored as well. The world becomes a judgmental place, and you become the judged--the broken part. You begin collecting evidence to support this belief-stance in every situation--whether a job loss, the death of a loved one, a fender bender, or even drawing some lackluster letters in Scrabble. *Why does this always happen to me?* You step into a story line in which you somehow are bad/wrong/on the losing end--for the world, others, and yourself. You create reasons to back up your belief.



We're really good at this. We remember and weigh the negative more than the positive. As the authors of wonderful book *Switch* point out, this tendency is pervasive in our culture and even seems hardwired into our language.

...[A] psychologist analyzed 558 emotion words—every one that he could find in the English language—and found that 62 percent of them were negative versus 38 positive. That's a pretty shocking discrepancy.

This negative focus is not confined to emotions. Across the board, we seem wired to focus on the negative. A group of psychologist reviewed over two hundred articles and concluded that, for a wide range of human behavior and perception, a general principle holds true: "Bad is stronger than good."²



In a different take on the same topic, the delightful writer Ann Lamott speaks about the internal radio station "KFKD" (yes, that means what you think) which is on the air 24 hours a day for many of us. Among other community services, it continually runs a playlist of "the rap songs of self-loathing, the lists of all the things one doesn't do well, of all the mistakes one has made today and over an entire lifetime, the doubt, the assertion that everything that one touches turns to shit, that one doesn't do relationships well, that

¹ David Whyte. "Sweet Darkness" in *House of Belonging*. Many Rivers Press. 1997.

² Chip Heath and Dan Heath. "Find the Bright Spots" in *Switch: How to Change Things When Change Is Hard*. Broadway Books. 2010.

one is in every way a fraud, incapable of selfless love, that one has no talent or insight, and on and on and on."³

The effects can be profound, across many different frames of reference. In terms of psychological and physical health, self-judgment is frequently linked to depression and despair. It can keep us mired in self-destructive patterns, with strong consequences for both our spirits and bodies. In the realm of manifesting, teachers frequently warn that self-judgment and the associated negative feelings interfere with one's ability to attract abundance. For one's religious/spiritual life, this pattern can lead to a relationship with Source based primarily on fear and even despair rather than love, hope, and delight.

In addition, self-judgment and the corresponding lack of self-trust can reduce our sense of clarity and cause us to turn down the power of our wanting (because we're judging our thoughts and feelings and desires). This habit impairs our ability to access our own wisdom and make important choices for ourselves from a place of clarity and ease. These include our most fundamental decisions about how we're going to spend our time on the planet. Instead, we look outside ourselves for guidance from other authorities because we have learned throughout our lives not to trust our own inclinations.



Following are some of the best methods I've learned over the years for how to meet and transform self-judgment.

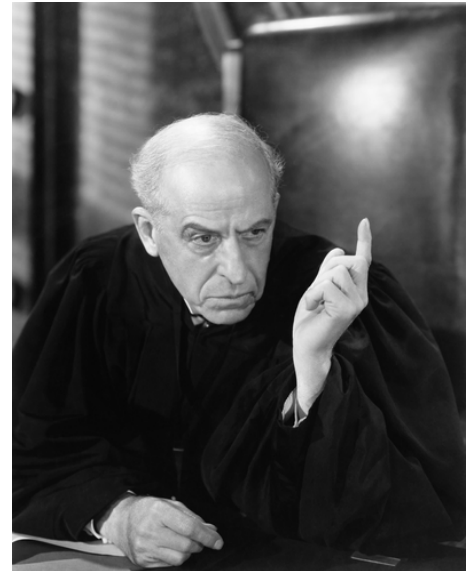
³Ann Lamott. "The Writing Frame of Mind" in *Bird by Bird*. Anchor Press. 1995.

1. YOU CAN'T JUDGE YOUR WAY OUT OF IT

One of our most automatic reflexes when we become aware of some aspect of ourselves that we want to change is to judge ourselves for it. We're schooled from an early age that unhappiness is an effective motivator and even a prerequisite for change.

In fact, we usually equate being unhappy with being "serious" about change, as if not judging the thing we want to change (and ourselves by extension) is taking the slacker's way out. It's true that taking responsibility for your unhappiness is essential to change. However, it's counter-productive if responsibility just becomes another stick you use to beat yourself with. Taking ownership of your "stuff" is the key to transformation, but hitting yourself repeatedly in the head with your stuff until you're immobilized is not especially useful.

As expert as I am at self-judgment (and I've really made it an art form), I've never found that I could get myself out of it by judging it. As a wise friend once quipped, "Judging judging is still judging" (from the forthcoming Dr. Seuss's Guide to Self-Judgment). Rather than doing anything to lighten the Judgment Load, it just adds considerable more weight (of a particularly dense and heavy kind) to the big sack of *What's Wrong with Me?* that you're already carrying around.



I believe that it's possible to **take responsibility, be clear-eyed** about the place you're currently in, **understand the gap** between that place and your ultimate goal, and **be absolutely committed to bridging that gap *without* beating yourself up.**

So, make friends with your self-judgment. Begin with the assumption that self-judgment is just one thing you do (like everything you do) to take care of yourself. Perhaps even express gratitude for that. And then, begin self-inquiry--gently, curiously, playfully, lovingly. What am I judging about myself? Why am I judging it? How is it serving me to judge it? How might I do things differently in order to serve myself better?

A question asked from a place of love is very different from one asked from a place of judgment. The latter are more often additional judgments masquerading as questions. So, frame your questions as you would to a friend--someone you **really** like--that you're trying to help.

2. WATCH YOUR LANGUAGE

We're schooled in the language of judgment from a very early age:

"Good boy"
"Bad girl"
"You should be ashamed...."
"You make Mommy and Daddy very unhappy."
"What's wrong with you?"

We are good students and pick up the habit of using that language reflexively. In addition to clear and strong statements like those above, our language becomes infected with more subtle expressions of judgment:

"I really shouldn't..."
"She ought to..."
"It would be better if..."
"It's awful when..."

You've heard the expression you are what you eat? Even more importantly, **you are what you think**, and your words are the vessels for your thoughts. Words like "ought" and "should" come loaded with some heavy thought baggage, as do "It..." constructions (such as "It would be better if....").

I believe we often lean toward these "it" verbal structures because we believe that they lend our thoughts a certain objectivity that we fear they wouldn't otherwise have if we were just clearly saying what we wanted. They present the image of an external standard, a reassuring bulwark to shore up our cause. (Essentially, we're saying "*It is the case* rather than *I think...*"). However, such verbal structures can box us in if we're not careful. *Shoulds* can function as rules in our thinking and feeling, and our *Big Shoulds* and *little shoulds* can get all tangled together.

Another possibility--and a more empowered position--is to stop hiding behind *oughts* and *shoulds* and *its* and to **take ownership of the directions we want to move in**. Such an approach emphasizes our ability to create our own state and shifts us out of the victim position. One practical way to do that is to shift away from the language of judgment in favor of *I* statements that express preferences rather than judgments.

"I want/don't want...."
"I'd prefer that..."



"I think that it would be more useful if she...."
"I like/don't like it when..."

Does that prospect feel a little "gooier" to you--a little less solid or objective? If so, be aware that any discomfort you may feel around expressing preferences could be fertile ground for self-exploration, because it likely springs from the same place as your judgments.

Remembering what we discussed in Section 1 also be aware of the content and tone of the questions you ask yourself. *What's wrong with me?* is not just a question; it's a statement decorated with a question mark. In fact, it's a parchment-papered, hand-embossed invitation to judgment. A more useful response might be *Hmmmm. That's interesting. How come I did that?*

3. STAY WITH THE NITTY-GRITTY: BE SPECIFIC

When we get into a habit of judging ourselves, our judgments can become unquestioned assumptions and facts of our existence. The judgment path becomes very well-worn, and we glide down it with little or no effort and little awareness of what we're doing.

One way this phenomenon reveals itself for those of us who begin doing inquiry on our self-judgments is that we frequently generalize them: *Why do I **always** do this?* Our discomfort with *this* particular situation gets folded into our general sense of our self—our habitual self-perception.

That's an understandable response, but it can create a barrier to really getting to the root of the judgment. When you're looking at a pattern of action that has persisted over an extended period of your life, you've essentially moved up to 25,000 feet. From that height, it's hard to make out the details that might give you some real insight into why you respond in a certain way in the moment, time and time again.



It is almost always more useful to stay with a specific instance—the nitty gritty. Don't ask "Why do I *always* fly off the handle?" Instead, ask "Why did I fly off the handle when I was talking to Joe last night about my job?" Even if we assume that there's probably some link between the reasons why you do it each time, you'll get much better resolution by looking at a specific instance.

In addition, be observant regarding how you phrase the question, to be sure that there's not a buried judgment that you're accepting as a premise. Certainly, it's more useful to ask "Why did I blow things out of proportion during the meeting this afternoon?" as opposed to "Why do I always blow things out of proportion?" However, "out of proportion" places an extra layer of judgment on the situation. Keep your language neutral, descriptive, and rooted in the particular: "Why did I get so angry during the meeting when Meg asked me about last month's sales numbers?"

Be a careful student of your thought process. The tendency to generalize is like a catapult that can launch you back into the upper atmosphere with little or no warning. When you catch yourself using words like "always," "never," "all the time," "usually," etc., reel yourself back in and bring your inquiry back down to earth.

4. QUESTION AUTHORITY

Some of our primal judgments are associated with particular individuals in our lives. The eyes and tone of an enraged parent, disapproving teacher, or reproachful spouse can be inextricably tied to a particular moment in our life from which we adopted a judgmental belief about ourselves. (Like family jewels, beliefs can be passed on and inherited, and the estate taxes can be quite hefty.) For this reason, it can be really useful to identify your **Board of Elders** from whom you echo some of your strongest judgments.

Besides these primal influences, there is a crowded marketplace of vendors hawking their diverse beliefwares, and our personal shopping carts can be quite full. There's an entire belief economy out there of voices competing for a place in your head. They don't have to belong to people you've met. Popes, politicians, Sunday AM pundits, celebrity fitness trainers, ancient philosophers, New York Times editors, and pointy-fingered televangelists are all candidates for the job. (Personally, I usually reserve a couple of seats on my Board of Elders for editors of the *National Review* and members of the Roman Catholic Curia.)

What's important to recognize in both these groups is that there's a belief under the surface that connects the "Elder" and the belief. Simply stated, it's the belief that this person has



special insight into my situation, and that his or her opinion about me matters. That belief might be a useful starting point for inquiry. What is it that gives him or her the sacred authority to make decisions about my ultimate worth? For each answer you get, probe deeper. Ask another "why."

"Yes, she's my mother. But why does she get to determine this?"

"Yes, he's my teacher, and he knows a lot about U.S. history. But what does he really know about *my* history? Why am I giving him the final word here?"

You may be surprised at your answers.

Understand that people make strong judgments about other folks--just like you do--for reasons that may have little or nothing to do with the person being judged. In fact, the strongest and most consistent thread running underneath our judgments of others ties back to some judgment or fear that we have about ourselves. In my own case, when I feel a strong judgment about another person arise (and it happens more often than you might think), once I get myself to quiet down and ask some questions, I can always find the link back to my own fears or judgments about myself. That's where the judgment voiced by another finds its hook in me. And I'm the one doing the hooking!

What to do? Usually, at that point, I make the flip in my mind, and **realize that the person who's judging me may be coming from a place where they, too, feel really lost and scared inside.** Something in me is reminding them of that.

Judgments don't come from **impeccability** (i.e., *I'm so perfect, so I get to judge you.*). Instead, they more often come from **vulnerability** (*I'm so scared, I have to judge you to protect myself and avoid looking at myself.*) As Jesus of Nazareth pointed out in the New Testament, it is usually the plank in our own eye--not the speck in someone else's eye--that's the issue.

Here's the real kicker: *The other person may not even be judging you at all.* What you may be interpreting as judgment might be a completely neutral trigger in



*Judgments don't usually come from
impeccability. More often, they
issue from **vulnerability**.*

Five Keys for Releasing Self-Judgment

their behavior--say, a confused look because they didn't hear you. You use that stimulus to activate your own judgment about yourself. Instead of going first to *He looks confused—maybe he couldn't hear me*, we are often more likely to respond with *He looks confused—he must think I'm an idiot*. We're just so good at judging ourselves, and those switches can trip so effectively

Eventually, you'll come to understand that the Board of Elders only has the power you give it. **It isn't a stern, authoritative tribunal; rather, it's a puppet show.**

And guess whose hands are in the puppets?



5. JUST LOVE

*[Wow, talk about gooey.
He must be running out of material.]*

No, I mean it. This is one of the simplest and the most profound steps. **Just love.**

It was an instruction delivered to me by my friend Erik over pizza one evening, following the close of an intensive one-week program in which we had done some serious soul-stretching personal work. Having watched me in class struggle for several days with my self-judgments and discomforts, and having seen my potential for love, he looked across the table at me with gentle and kind eyes—creating an island of calm in the middle of the bustling restaurant—and he said quietly,

Dude, why are you making it so hard? Just love. Just. Love.

I'll never forget that moment.

I hope you won't ever forget it, either. **Just love.** Starting with yourself. Self-acceptance does not have to mean giving up your desire to change. We love our kids even when they poop in their pants. Can we do the same for ourselves when we stumble on our path or don't hit the mark we set for ourselves?



One thing I know: **I have never been able to love and judge at the same time.** And the more I fill myself with love, the less room I have for judgment. But it takes a deliberate intention. It's a practice, a path we have to clear through the woods of our habitual emotional responses, a muscle to build up.

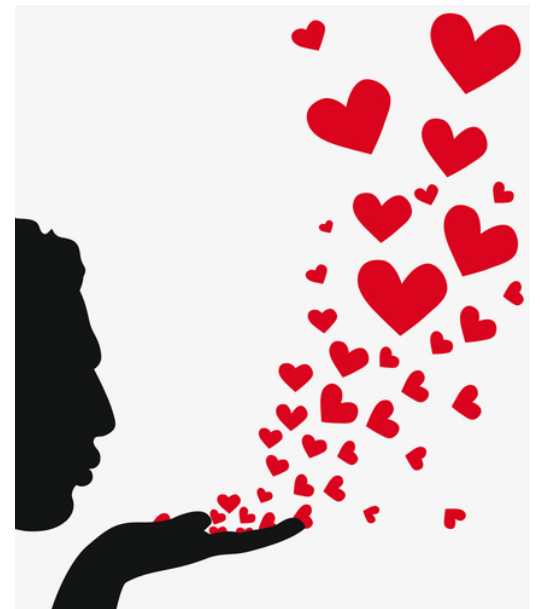
During those times when you get too caught up in your stuff and have trouble loving yourself, **turning your gaze outward and opening your heart to love others—in and through your own pain—is a beautiful way to help the planet and yourself.** Pema Chodron, the profoundly insightful Buddhist nun, talks in several of her books about the practice of *tonglen*, which is a way of spiritually connecting our own suffering and that of others around us.

As she describes it, *tonglen* typically starts when we set an intention to take on the suffering of someone that we know is in pain—someone that we want to help. However, our good intention can be thwarted when we bump up against our own barriers, our own “stuff.” That situation, she says, opens the door to a particularly beautiful heart-expanding opportunity:

Often...we can't do this practice because we come face to face with our own fear, our own resistance or anger, or whatever our personal pain happens to be just then.

At that point we can change the focus and **begin to do *tonglen* for what we are feeling and for millions of other people just like us who at that very moment are feeling exactly the same stuckness and misery....** We simply contact what we are feeling and breathe in, take it *in*, for all of us—and send *out* relief to all of us.

The practice dissolves the walls we've built around our hearts. It dissolves the layers of self-protection we've tried so hard to create.⁴



So, if you find yourself caught in a particularly painful vortex of self-judgment, **break the spiral by turning your heart outward,** and wishing peace, relief, and joy for anyone in the world who is experiencing the same pain that you are. This practice has never

⁴ Pema Chodron. “Going Against the Grain” in *When Things Fall Apart: Heart Advice for Difficult Times*. Shambhala. 1997.

failed to help me. It allows me to take my focus off myself and open myself to love, without ever denying my own pain.

There's a lovely line in the New Testament that applies here: *Love casteth out fear* (1 John 4:18). Because judgment and fear are so integrally tied together, I would argue that love casts out judgment as well.

Love casteth out fear.

1 John 4:18

Or, as the wonderful Samahria Lyte Kaufman is so fond of saying, *The one who loves the most wins.*⁵



⁵ Samahria is Co-Founder and Co-Director of The Option Institute International Learning and Training Center in Sheffield, Massachusetts, along with her husband, Barry Neil Kaufman ("Bears" to his students), the best-selling author of *Happiness is a Choice*. I highly recommend their programs. www.option.org.

BONUS! BELIEVE THAT YOU CAN CHANGE

In closing, I want to leave you with one more incredibly powerful tool: **Believe that you can change.** It's so simple that it often gets overlooked.

Believing that you *can* do something is critical—even if you don't have the foggiest idea yet *how*. More than critical, it's *magical*, because it opens up the field of possibility and stimulates your creativity, energy, and optimism. These in turn give you access to the internal resources and momentum to figure out a way.



How we set up the board will determine the game that we will play. If you believe that it's possible to change your life, you are correct. If you don't believe it's possible, or that it can only be done with great difficulty and over a long period of time, you are also correct.

Judgments are beliefs that tend to shut us down. It's important not just to release them, but to *replace* them with beliefs that open us up—expanding our hearts and our worlds.

Believing that it is possible to get there is the very first step to getting there.

Shall we begin?

*Whatever you can do or dream
you can do, **begin it.** Boldness has
genius, power and magic in it.*

-Goethe

Christopher Kisling is a Counselor and Coach who helps people to deepen their self-understanding and increase their comfort, happiness, and self-acceptance so that they can step into the lives they've always wanted. You can learn more about his work on his website, www.you-are-ok.com.

If you would like to investigate whether this work is for you, contact Chris to schedule a complimentary 45-minute consultation:

chris@chriskisling.com
(225) 336-4161