

Safely Challenged: Self-Compassion and Mindfulness Enhancing Each Other

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This morning, as I lingered outside the meditation hall before morning practice, I came upon the biography of E.B. White. I randomly opened the book and this is the verse that I found:

*The critic leaves at curtain fall
To find, in starting to review it
He scarcely saw the play at all
For watching his reactions to it*

It helped me realize that the Inner Critic (like the Drama Critic) always dwells outside the “play” itself or outside of our direct moment-to-moment experience. That experience of each moment is the center of three concentric circles where that center circle represents *safety*, the next circle out represents *challenge* and the largest circle is *overwhelm*. The critic’s harsh voice comes from the outside in, can tangle us in overwhelm or just pummel us at the level of challenging. But we can find some refuge in the safety of the inner circle of moment-to-moment experience.

In fact, the area outside of the safe circle is really where we most often live our lives because this is where we connect with other people, encounter triumph, tragedy, love and loss.

So I think of mindfulness as learning how to find our safe circle and how to make our way back to the refuge of the present moment when we are caught in reactivity and suffering. It is here in this safe circle where we can find our feet, where we can be nourished by our own resources and become clear on our values. We all have different degrees of ability to return to that safe circle but we all have some capacity.

While “pure” mindfulness can give us refuge in the present moment, it can be dry and cold just living in bare attention of each moment in our safe place. We actually *live* at the edges of that circle or even beyond, and something in us is curious, wants to be connected and even wants to be challenged, if only in a small way.

Compassion by itself, disconnected from the wellspring of the present moment, can be kind and warm, but scattered, unfocused and in the end, unsustainable because it can't be easily replenished.

When we bring compassion, and particularly self-compassion, to the practice of mindfulness then we actually gently expand the circle of safety into the area of challenge so that we can feel some ease in challenge, engaged in the sometimes messy (but also fulfilling) world of suffering, self-criticism, or the dragons that lurk beyond the charted territories of ancient maps. By warming up the conversation we can actually build ourselves a progressively bigger platform from which to live, that allows for a bit of permeability (if that's called for) between safety and challenge. This new expanded presence can allow us to hear the inner critic, to invite in the wisdom of a compassionate being, or to consider the need that has not been met by others so that we can provide it to ourselves.

By remembering that the critic lives in the space around the safety circle, we can be reminded that this is where our attention and our compassion should be directed if we seek change or relief. We cannot dwell on the presence of difficult feelings or challenging other people if we want a way through our suffering. We can only tend to the relationship we have with the feelings or the people and how we can meet those unchangeable facts with some degree of warmth and kindness that can relieve the suffering in wanting things to be different than they are.