



Reducing Excessive Self-Criticism Journey

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Step 26: Why Do We Need Punishment?

This question is one of the most important and at the same time one of the most elusive questions in understanding the story of excessive self-criticism within the human being. It touches on a kind of masochistic habit that is considered part of what is perceived as “normal,” while at the same time there exists, most likely, a far-reaching denial regarding it. Without this denial, this habit of living within excessive self-criticism would not have been able to continue in such a widespread and significant way within human existence.

There is a reason, and perhaps we will discover that there is more than one reason, for why a person agrees to “absorb” emotional punishments within themselves on a regular basis, often daily. They are used to living this way, used to existing in this way. There is a kind of feeling that “this is how it is supposed to be, it cannot be otherwise. I will always encounter excessive self-criticism within myself and experience the pain it causes. This is not going to change.”

When we ask ourselves, and if we ask almost any person, “Why do we need punishment?” and perhaps more directly, “Why do we need punishment from ourselves on such a regular basis?”, it is likely that we will not receive a satisfying answer. The question itself may sound “strange” or “confusing.” “What punishments are you talking about? I do not understand what you mean. I have no tendency or agreement to experience punishment...”

As mentioned, without the sweeping denial of this phenomenon, it is possible that this subject would have received a more visible place in public discourse, and a book like this might have been written decades ago. But if we are here, and able to look directly at the phenomenon and recognize that it is a form of excessive, unnecessary, and harmful inner punishment, then all that remains is to ask this question, even if at first we do not find complete answers.

Sometimes, in order to understand more deeply, it is necessary first to dare to ask the right and not simple questions, even if for a while they remain “in the air” without a complete and satisfying answer.

The initial task in this context, therefore, is to allow the level of denial and avoidance of this question to begin to decrease, just as we seek to reduce the level of our excessive self-criticism. The more we reduce denial of the fact that excessive self-criticism is a form of inner punishment, and the more we recognize that this punishment occurs regularly, the more we can return to wondering, and perhaps even find ourselves surprised by this strange and essential question: why do we need punishment?

The answer to this question is simple and clear, yet not easy to admit. There is only one answer to the question “Why do I need punishment?” and it is: “Because I am not okay. I deserve punishment because I am not okay.” On the experiential level, there is no other answer to this question. It is an automatic and unusual answer that arises in response to a question that is itself unusual and difficult to ask, yet important to ask: why do we need punishment?

Is a person willing to recognize that within them there exists an almost constant feeling, or a recurring feeling, of “I am not okay”? This is the first question, a meaningful question of self-awareness that is worth pausing on.

The more advanced question that should follow is: is there truly a reason for me to feel this way, and am I willing to continue agreeing to remain in this experience, or do I wish to begin dealing with its presence?

One of the major problems, on a social level, around this subject is the habit and consensus surrounding this quiet and insufficiently discussed experience, the experience that exists at the foundation of most people’s lives, if not all. This is the experience of “I am not okay,” which sometimes develops into an even more surprising experience: “I am not okay and I deserve punishment.”

This habit creates, on one hand, a sweeping denial and avoidance of these feelings, a denial that prevents change. On the other hand, this same denial and habit “normalize” the situation. A person feels, as mentioned earlier in the context of belonging, that there is nothing wrong with feeling “not okay” internally, and that in fact it is “completely okay” to feel that something is “not okay” about them.

This inner mechanism, which generates feelings of guilt, self-blame, self-doubt, a sense of incapability, pessimism, lack of hope, fear of initiative, self-condemnation over “errors” or “mistakes,” hesitation, procrastination, and lack of self-acceptance, is a mechanism that ultimately receives both personal and social approval to exist. It becomes, in one way or another, perceived as “normal.” From here also emerges the legitimacy for critical, judgmental, and sometimes even hostile attitudes toward others, as an external expression of what is internally perceived as legitimate.

At this stage, where we are now, I suggest leaving the question open, allowing it to undergo an internal process that over time will provide new and interesting answers. The question is: why do I need punishment right now? This is a question that should not be

answered immediately or in a definitive way, but rather listened to. To listen to the question and to the quiet implications contained within it.

As long as we are unable to listen to this simple yet meaningful question, we will not be able to change the existing balance with excessive self-criticism, which often receives almost unlimited permission to punish as much as it can, through the creation of emotional pain and experiences of lack of belonging and lack of worth.

Do we need punishment in order to learn something that we could not learn otherwise? In the past, this was the accepted method of education, and perhaps it is not only in the past, but still exists today in a somewhat different form. To punish in order to teach. To punish in order to “teach a lesson.” To punish in order to set a boundary, supposedly. To punish as part of dealing with a problem.

Are we aware that we use this tool of punishment unconsciously within ourselves? Are we able to notice that moment of shame, of inner disappointment, of exaggerated and diminishing inner scolding that does not allow us to go anywhere except “into the corner,” until the unpleasant experience passes?

Awareness that this is an act of punishment is highly significant, even before we seek to change it into something more gentle and beneficial. There is a process to go through until we reach a reasonable and continuous level of awareness, on the experiential level, that events of “punishment” occur far more frequently than we have ever estimated. They happen within us, and potentially can occur at any moment.

When excessive self-criticism has the opportunity to “punish” us, it ultimately creates a form of deterrence. This is the greatest problem arising from excessive self-criticism. We develop a style of thinking, acting, and decision making in which fear of punishment is already embedded.

We quickly reach a state of avoiding things that could nurture and expand our lives, simply because somewhere within us there is fear of an unpleasant reaction that will come from excessive self-criticism.

In order to begin changing the course of things, we will remain for some time with this question, and try not to provide it with a final answer. Instead, we will ask it again and again: why do I need punishment? We will ask it in a simple and open way, allowing ourselves to be receptive to a range of answers.

The more this question is asked, the more the quiet mechanisms of deterrence will be revealed, and the clearer the nature of the experience that occurs when excessive self-criticism is active will become. As these begin to move within us, we can continue advancing in learning the tools for reducing excessive self-criticism.

Questions for Self-Reflection (preferably in writing):

1. How do you currently assess the level of activity of your “initiative muscle” in your life?
2. Give an example of something you initiated in the past, even though others did not fully support or encourage you.
3. What emotional changes do you experience when you are at a higher level of initiative than usual?
4. Are you willing to take a risk and initiate something connected to your passion that might not succeed this time? How will you support yourself in dealing with possible failure?
5. What initiative do you fantasize about doing sometime in the future? And perhaps you can begin to bring that future closer to you, in some way?
6. Is there anything else you would like to share or write about what you read in this step? Experiences, insights, questions, feelings?