



Reducing Excessive Self-Criticism Journey

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Step 29: We Need Guilt

Ultimately, this highly convincing “performance” of the inner courtroom, the sense of guilt, and the experience of inner punishment that often accompany excessive self-criticism, all stem from a kind of internal permission that we grant for these things to occur. We are the ones who produce this story and carry it out again and again. There is no one else involved. It is something that takes place only between us and ourselves.

If this is so, and everything depends entirely on us, why does it continue to happen, even when we are already familiar with this phenomenon and have no desire for it to continue?

It continues, among other reasons, because somewhere within us, for reasons that we may not yet be able to fully uncover, there exists a certain need to continue being guilty from time to time. Without this need, it would not occur. Without the secondary gain that we experience from this problematic situation, it would not continue to exist.

As strange as this may sound, there is something encouraging in realizing that we return to feelings of guilt only because we need them. When we learn what truly drives this need and discover ways to address it appropriately, it will no longer lead us to reconstruct that same inner courtroom. We will be able to find other ways to relate to this need, ways that include more compassion, love, gentleness, and creativity, allowing it to calm without dragging us into unpleasant inner spaces.

It is worthwhile to pause for a moment and reflect on this question, especially on an experiential level, through a series of questions that can, and are recommended to, be written down and answered in any way that arises:

What happens to me when I feel guilty?

What emotional processes accompany this feeling?

Do I gain anything from it, even indirectly?

What am I avoiding when I experience this guilt, which often comes together with excessive self-criticism?

What would happen if I existed completely without guilt? Is that something I can imagine?

Can I imagine a human society in which guilt is no longer necessary?

Do I believe that guilt serves some protective role in my life?
Is there something I can offer myself instead of this difficult feeling of guilt?
Can I think of a healthier and more beneficial alternative to this feeling, which mostly causes me pain and paralysis?

These questions, and many others, can help deepen the journey of reducing excessive self-criticism and improving it. It is recommended to return to these questions many times and to remain open to diverse, evolving, and even surprising answers. It is also valuable to formulate additional questions in a similar spirit and to challenge ourselves to answer them with as much directness, openness, and courage as possible.

Among the many aspects that excessive self-criticism restricts within a person, we can pause for a moment on the experience of freedom as an example for this inner exploration. Feelings of guilt reduce the experience of freedom, the space for movement, and the sense of entitlement to positive and fulfilling experiences. This is what happens when we feel guilty, is it not?

We can therefore continue to ask: am I afraid of my freedom, and therefore allow feelings of guilt to manage and restrict me so that I do not fully realize my freedom? Do I believe, in any sense, that there is something dangerous or unbalanced about my fantasies of full freedom, and therefore they must be restrained through excessive self-criticism and guilt?

We can add further questions that help us see this picture more broadly and clearly:

Have there been moments in my life in which I experienced a particularly high level of freedom and release, and alongside them arose feelings of guilt or doubt, as if I was not supposed to allow myself to move so far from who I usually am and from the roles I am accustomed to carrying within me?

Have there been especially sweet moments of freedom, of absence of worries and limitations, that also stirred within me an uncomfortable sense of guilt and questions such as: am I allowed?
Is it acceptable for me to be this free right now?

Guilt is a highly effective tool for reducing a person's freedom. When a person feels guilty, most of their attention contracts around the issue for which they feel guilty. In those moments, they are immersed in the pain of guilt, in regret, and in a range of feelings of "I am not okay."

When a person feels that they are "not okay," the first thing they give up is their freedom. True freedom begins from within, from the feeling of "I am okay, I am good, I am worthy." From this feeling, a person becomes available and deserving of seeking and acting toward their freedom as a central aspect of their life.

When a person feels guilty, the inner foundation that could support the maintenance and expansion of their freedom becomes unstable. In those moments, they feel that they are

not worthy of the good things in life, and they become occupied with an obsessive and ineffective inner dialogue with excessive guilt, which, at least for a time, seems to have no exit.

Therefore, at the same time that we seek to reduce excessive self-criticism and the unnecessary and exaggerated guilt it creates within us, it is worthwhile to ask ourselves as many questions as possible about our ability, right now, to grant ourselves more freedom than we currently allow.

It is very likely that our fear of expanding our range of freedom, whatever its reasons may be, is responsible in one way or another for the recurring return of guilt. Guilt provides fear of freedom exactly what it seeks: that we be less free, less unpredictable, less spontaneous, less surprising, and ultimately less ourselves.

A day without guilt. Two days without guilt. A full week without any guilt. Can such a scenario be imagined? What exists there, in a reality where guilt no longer has a place, no longer has the ability to influence how we feel and how we act?

Who am I, who are you, who are we, as a human space, when the element of guilt dissolves from us, even as an imagined possibility?

What kind of change might occur when guilt ceases to play a central role and no longer stands between the person and their true freedom?

What do you think about issuing a dismissal notice to your guilt, even as a symbolic act? Can we manage without guilt?

Can we take responsibility for mistakes without falling into the painful experience of guilt that excessive self-criticism so easily and quickly creates?

In order to reduce excessive self-criticism, which almost always arrives with some level of guilt, it is worthwhile to pause and ask many questions about the degree of freedom we are willing to grant ourselves, about the freedom we aspire to and are willing to invest in.

Excessive self-criticism and the component of guilt that accompanies it are present, among other reasons, because the level of freedom we allow ourselves is still limited. This limitation, this restriction of freedom, is something we create for ourselves through the permission we give excessive self-criticism to operate without interference.

The more deeply we come to know the form of freedom that is possible for us, and the more we reduce our fear of moving toward it a little more each day, the more naturally we will feel less guilt and less criticism. We will have less need for these artificial limitations, and they will become unnecessary. But for this to happen, we must choose our freedom. As long as we do not, the criticism will remain as it is.

Questions for Self-Reflection (preferably in writing):

1. Write 12 associations for the word “freedom.”
2. What is the most important thing, in your view, that a person gains when they become more free? What improves as freedom increases?
3. Are you aware of the connection between excessive self-criticism, feelings of guilt, and the restriction of human freedom? Do you recognize the contraction of freedom that arises when excessive criticism intensifies?
4. Complete the sentence 6 times: “When I allow myself much more freedom than today, I will probably be able to...”
5. Do you have an idea for some initiative or experiment that could give you a pleasant and sweet experience of freedom in the near future? What could that be?
6. Is there anything else you would like to share or write about what you read in this step? Experiences, insights, questions, feelings?