Talk to Yourself Like a Buddhist

Five Mindful Practices to Silence Negative Self-Talk

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Table of Contents

Introduction 1

CHAPTER 1

CHAPTER 2
Judgment: The Accomplice of Negative Self-Talk 29

CHAPTER 3
The Middle Path of Self-Communication Overview 49

CHAPTER 4
The Practice of Listening 55

CHAPTER 5
The Practice of Exploration 69

CHAPTER 6
The Practice of Questioning 91

CHAPTER 7
The Practice of Releasing 109
Introduction

There’s no denying it, communication is important! In fact, one could easily make the case that communication is central to being human. While other species on this planet can and do communicate with each other, none do so with the complexity and regularity that we do.

Because of this, much has been written about the art of communication, and a trip to your local bookstore will yield a variety of books on the topic, most with a focus on one particular aspect of communication. Some are dedicated to enhancing how we interact in the workplace, others to our romantic relationships, and still more to our relationships with our family and friends.

But all of these books have one thing in common: they are designed to help you learn how to communicate
more effectively with others. When we talk about communication, we normally think about it in relation to everyone else—only rarely, if ever, do we pay much attention to how we speak to ourselves.

As a communication instructor, I find the lack of attention we pay to how we communicate with ourselves alarming, because what I discovered in myself, and confirmed through working with countless clients, is that there is an unreported epidemic of negative self-talk in our culture today.

The truth is that many of us speak to ourselves in a way we would never speak to a close friend. Some of us even speak to ourselves in ways that we would never speak to our worst enemy! “I’m so dumb, how could I do that again?” or “I’m such a loser” are common phrases that people say to themselves, but rarely, if ever, do they voice those words to others.

Statements like this are just the beginning of how we berate ourselves internally.

In this book I will cover the many often unnoticed ways we talk down to, berate, and chastise ourselves. We will look at the instances of our self-talk that are birthed in animosity rather than goodwill. As a simple example to begin this discussion, think for a moment about how many times you’ve begun a conversation in your mind (or out loud) with a phrase similar to one of these:

I can’t do anything right today.
I’m not where I should be in life.

I’m so stupid.

I’d be happier if I just looked more like . . .

Maybe things would have been different if I had just . . .

I’m so bad at that.

I never get this right.

These are just some of the ways we start negative dialogues with ourselves, often without even realizing that what we are saying is negative (we mistake many of our judgments for facts!). Yet when we speak to ourselves this way, we set a tone for our day and our interactions with others in the world. It’s very difficult to enjoy life and experience things like peace, happiness, and goodwill on the outside when we aren’t providing it to ourselves on the inside.

The purpose of this book is to bring awareness to the ways that we talk to ourselves—specifically, the negative self-talk and the underlying self-judgments that we engage in that cloud our perceptions of ourselves and, by implication, the rest of the world. My hope is that by the end of this book, not only will you be more aware of the negative self-talk that most of us seem to engage in regularly, but you will also be able to spot, identify, and release it effectively.
I have included a set of five practices in this book to help you do just that. I developed these practices based on my training as a communication expert and certified mindfulness and meditation instructor and, just as importantly, my own personal experience.

I call this set of practices the Middle Path of Self-Communication.

Those of you who are familiar with Buddhism will recognize the Middle Path reference, but to those of you who are not, don’t worry—the reference will be explained thoroughly in this book.

Quickly defined, the Middle Path is a fundamental principle of Buddhism that advocates bringing moderation and balance to everything that you do. When we have balance, we can see things with clarity. When we are out of balance, our vision and perception become clouded, and this includes how we see ourselves.

In terms of self-communication, an example of being out of balance is when you beat yourself up or berate yourself for making a simple mistake or when you compare yourself to others and decide that you are somehow “less important” than they are. Most of us have had these perceptions from time to time, and they reflect a view of ourselves that isn’t true. Everyone makes mistakes, and making one is not a cause for self-flagellation. Everyone on this planet is equal; no one is more important than anyone else.
Bringing balance to your self-communication also includes the practice of another fundamental tenent of Buddhism: compassion.

When we think of compassion, we often think of it as it extends to other people. In fact, Webster’s dictionary describes compassion as “a sympathetic consciousness of others’ distress together with a desire to alleviate it.” The only problem I have with this definition is that it’s limited in scope. Most often, we learn to extend this principle outwardly to others without extending it inwardly to ourselves. Compassion is a wonderful quality to cultivate both within yourself and for yourself.

Imagine what your days would feel like if you learned to speak to yourself with compassion, as if you were your own best friend. What would your internal dialogue look like if you spoke to yourself with the same compassion you extend to your closest friends and family? If you’re like me and most of my clients, your life would be filled with much more happiness and tranquility. While making this change in how you speak to yourself is not easy, doing so can drastically improve the quality of your life.

That is my other hope for you: that by the end of this book, not only will you have learned how to silence your negative self-talk, but you will also begin to speak to yourself with the same tone of kindness and compassion you would use in discussing something with your best friend.
The Middle Path of Self-Communication is a set of practices to help you do just that. To summarize, this is a path that teaches you how to monitor your internal conversations mindfully and notice when they begin to become tainted by untrue, unhelpful, or unkind beliefs, self-judgments, and the resulting negative self-talk.

The Middle Path of Self-Communication does not encourage you to simply replace negative self-talk with a set of positive affirmations, but rather to begin a balanced way of talking to yourself that relies on kindness, without allowing old and unquestioned beliefs to cloud the language that you use with yourself.

Once you begin to practice the Middle Path of Self-Communication with yourself, you will also have a new method by which you can communicate effectively with others. While the primary goal of this book is to show you how to move away from negative self-talk and the underlying judgments that cause it, you’ll soon see that these processes and practices can be applied to conversations with others as well.

What to Expect from This Book
We’ll start by defining negative self-talk and exposing the various ways it affects our daily lives, as you may be surprised by how often it goes unrecognized. After that we will look at the beliefs and judgments that hide underneath such diatribes, so you can understand
their relationship to the dialogues that we have with ourselves.

After we have adequately defined the problem, we will delve into the practices of the Middle Path of Self-Communication: Listen, Explore, Question, Release, and Balance. These five practices are helpful when undertaken as stand-alone tools, but when interwoven and used in succession, they form an effective blueprint for moving away from negative self-talk and toward a path of compassionate communication with yourself.

Each practice has an entire chapter devoted to it, and the purpose is to provide you a fuller, deeper understanding of how you can use them to improve your self-communication habits. It’s also important to point out that as with many tools in Buddhism, I refer to these concepts as “practices.” The choice of the word “practice” is threefold.

First of all, a practice refers to something that you do rather than just read about or think about. To that aim, many of the chapters will include exercises, and you’ll need either a journal or some blank paper in order to complete them. It’s very important to go through the exercises so you can better implement and understand the ideas presented. Until you do the associated work, you are unlikely to realize the full benefits of the Middle Path of Self-Communication.

The word “practice” also conveys the idea that this work won’t be done perfectly. This is very important
to remember, because as you will see, some of our negative self-talk is the result of holding ourselves to impossible standards. You want to be careful that you don’t turn your progress on the Middle Path of Self-Communication into a measurement by which you further berate yourself.

Lastly, the word “practice” is meant to convey the idea that the process is ongoing. In my experience, we never “win” the battle with negative self-talk. It will still occur after you finish with this book, but when you apply the practices you find here, it’s likely that the number of instances and the effect they have on you will be greatly reduced.

The Middle Path of Self-Communication is like medicine to treat the negativity and suffering that, as you will soon see, is largely self-created. Like most medicine today, it has side effects. Unlike some other medications, though, the side effects to using this style of self-communication include feeling good about your body, feeling secure and safe in your finances, and feeling love and peace in your relationships. It’s amazing how many perks you will begin to see when you shift how you speak to yourself.

The other benefit to exposing and releasing your negative self-talk is that it can actually improve your communication and relationships with others. For example, I worked with a woman who berated herself constantly about what she perceived as her inability to
succeed in her chosen profession. As she went through the practices in the Middle Path of Self-Communication, she was able to discover the source of this negative self-talk and ultimately release it. She realized that before she did the practices in this book, she would come home every day from work in a bad mood and take her negative emotions out on her partner. When she fixed her thinking and the corresponding dialogue with herself, her relationship with her partner benefited too, as he was no longer subjected to the outbursts that were fueled by her negativity toward herself.

Before we embark on the solution, we first need a better understanding of the problem. As you will see in chapter 1, identifying negative self-talk and all of its manifestations is easier said than done.