

Acceptance Approval Validation

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Keep your beliefs positive because...

Your beliefs become your thoughts.
Your thoughts become your words.
Your words become your actions.
Your actions become your habits.
Your habits become your values.
Your values become your destiny.

- Mahatma Gandhi

The need for love and acceptance was a faithful companion for much of my life. Even as some of my most positive experiences unfolded, I frequently contorted the moment into a pursuit for approval. As a result, one could argue that my life-long spiritual path, if determined by actual time dedicated to the practice, has been the quest for validation rather than a quest for insight. When my path was clouded by the need for external acceptance, I failed to recognize my true nature. Had the objective been one of enlightenment, the notion of approval would never have obscured a realization of peace and happiness.

I was sixteen years old when I tried to commit suicide. Looking back, I can easily shrug and dismiss my actions as misguided and delusional. At that time, I gave power to my thoughts; I had the erroneous notion that everything I believed must be true. Adolescence in the suburbs of 1970s and 80s Pittsburgh was not an inviting time or place for the self-expression of sexual orientation. I felt the sting of invective slung at "us" boys unable to throw any type of ball or score a touchdown. In the absence of role models, healthy or otherwise, I did not know what to do with my thoughts and feelings, which appeared glaringly divergent from



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the mainstream. I was swimming in feelings of shame, guilt and disapproval.

At sixteen, *I knew*, without a doubt, that I would be unaccepted all my life; I would never know love, respect or approval from anyone at all, ever. My mind latched on to classmates' mere taunts at my lack of athletic prowess, and embellished and echoed them in my head; *you're a freak; you're disgusting; who would love you if they knew what you are? No one! No one else is like you, you are all alone in the world and you will never find happiness.* This is what I "knew" – period. I could not comprehend how these, or any of my thoughts for that matter, might be false. I did not know to analyze or assess what my mind asserted. I think a thought; therefore, it must be so. As if working an algebraic equation, I deduced the logical conclusion; the answer was suicide. Obviously, and gratefully, I was unsuccessful.

Spiritual teachers and writers remind us that our true nature is untainted and pure, whether named pure love, pure awareness, or pure happiness. In some yoga schools of thought, our true essence is called pure bliss. This state is unrelated to the common, transitory nature of our emotions. Our true bliss being is unchangeable, while our emotions and our thoughts fluctuate. As Gandhi's quote encourages, we must be careful with our thoughts and beliefs, for they grow into actions, habits and emotions. How often do we question the validity of our beliefs? At sixteen, I did not, for I never knew such examination was possible. How frequently do we ask ourselves, *Is that true?* For instance:

He's rude.
Is that true?

That was a horrible movie.
Is that true?

I am worthless.
Is that true?

We make pronouncements all day long as if they are royal decrees, and we expect, if not demand, others to follow suit. I have heard myself utter, *Oh, I don't want to be judgmental*, only to be astonished seconds later when my subsequent words declare how that friend was mean, this particular patient was rude, some woman standing in the grocery line next to me was disrespectful, etc. We say these statements as if they are facts (TRUTH?), when in actuality, they are nothing but personal perspectives that can change swiftly with a shift in disposition, context or additional information. Such comments fall under the rubric of psychological information. The path of peace begins by recognizing the difference between factual (truthful) and psychological (opinion) information; between statements of fact and statements of judgment.

Anything that can be measured, evaluated, or quantified is factual information; *it is 98°F outside. He is wearing a green shirt. She is 84 years old. I was a student at Bastyr University.* Each of these can be measured and substantiated. Declaring that the shirt he is wearing is green is a fact, as the wavelengths reflected can be measured using a spectrometer.

Psychological information, on the other hand, is subjective, and hence, cannot be measured. It is opinion and judgment. *It is hot outside. That shirt is ugly. She is old. My school sucks.* Although these judgments may be based on facts, psychological information is not truth. I am sharing opinion, nothing



more, yet my words do not readily convey this. In much of our speech, we disguise judgment, parading it as fact, or more significantly as truth, and this is where confusion and suffering arise. Such definitive statements contain a force that leaves little room for movement or dissention.

It is hot outside differs tremendously from saying, *For me, this temperature feels hot; I am sweating in this weather;* or even, *I am uncomfortable when it is 85°F outside.* Were I to utter, *It is hot today,* you could immediately counter by telling me, *No, it isn't. It is 85°F.* Thus we begin a process of debate and argument, devoid of any meaningful information, each of us intent on proving that our point of view is correct. As the old adage wisely mocks, it is better to be right than happy. When querying patients about their preference, not surprisingly, a majority chose being right over choosing happiness.

While not always the case, I believe that treating our opinions as truth most often stems from a longing for approval, even when it generates nothing but discord. A foolproof method to ensure disagreement is to treat psychological information as truth. How does one approach when faced with such a comment as, *That movie was awful* – especially when one does not agree? Even if ninety-nine percent of the people polled shared the same critique, it still remains judgment. The only conclusion one can extract from such a census would be the quantifiable fact that ninety-nine percent of people polled thought this movie was awful. Not that the one individual is wrong.

A few days before Christmas, Marcie came into my office and spoke about her frustrations with her partner. Ready for their trip to Los Angeles to celebrate the holidays, Marcie surveyed their apartment. *It's a pigsty,* she told me. As she spoke, her cheeks flushed, her shoulders raised, and her forearms and fists tightened. *I live with such an inconsiderate slob who doesn't care enough about me to help me clean the house. If he loved me, he would pick up after himself. He is so self-centered.* Marcie did not realize it, but she too created her own suffering by treating her opinions as truth. In her quest for approval, Marcie believed it was better to be right than happy, keeping her thoughts unquestioned yet resolute.

Marcie had been considering a separation from her partner for over a year now. Sounding ever so rational and reasonable, Marcie told me how her friends and family repeatedly wondered why she remained in such an unfulfilling relationship. She could clearly list in detail what she wanted in a partner, and this guy wasn't cutting the mustard. Through our sessions, she began to inquire about her hidden, unspoken and often unconscious needs and expectations. During previous sessions, we had talked about how expectations are frequently a source of frustra-



tion and pain. When we began to explore Marcie's need for approval and the ways in which she treated psychological information as truth, a shift in her unhappiness began.

I asked Marcie to assess whether or not her thoughts, revealed by her speech, fell under the heading of truth or opinion. I reminded her that such an inquiry in no way judges psychological information, nor considers it to be lesser, good or bad, healthy or dysfunctional, right or wrong. For our purposes we were merely recognizing that opinion is not truth, and attending to the disparity.

Marcie and I began to review one by one the thoughts she was treating as truth. *I live with an inconsiderate slob.* I asked, "Is this truthful or psychological information?" Immediately, Marcie hunkered down and began to spew further justifications. *Of course he is. He never picks up a single newspaper. He never does any laundry or washes a dish. I ask him to help me out all the time, and he knows how important it is to me. If you knew how important something was to your partner, wouldn't you help them out? How inconsiderate is that?* "So it is true that he is inconsiderate?" "Don't you think so? I mean, if he loved me he would care about my feelings, and help out.

There it was: the major distortion that has propelled arguments and battles all over the world. *If you love me you would do some thing,* and that **thing** is whatever I deem important and necessary. Is this love? If we question this belief we find several

assumptions. First is the thought that if someone loves us they would act a certain way, do a particular thing; for Marcie, this meant house cleaning. The inverse of this is that if the person in question does not carry out our wishes, they do not love us. Are these truths? Are they factual or psychological information? Should Marcie's partner wash the dishes? As I have written about previously, asking *why* tends to lead us down the road of justifications, and these merely become additional statements of psychological information. *Why shouldn't he clean up, he lives there, too*, might be one response. In lieu of these, I simply asked, "Is it truth or opinion?"

If it were true that love means cleaning the house, then I would have to conclude my father does not love my mother, since he never vacuumed or dusted a day in his life. Does he truly love her? According to both of them, he does. Of course, my mother may not have wanted my father to clean, and therefore he did what she wanted. It still remains to consider, is it true that *love means doing what I want*? While it might be nice on the surface, making behavior a caveat for love reduces it to conditionality. *I love you because you do this for me*. It confuses love with want.

I asked Marcie, "Is it true that your partner does not love you?" I realize, of course, that her partner might indeed not love her. He may say, *Marcie, I don't love you*. Even if that were the case, it would not make it fact that if someone loves us they would act a certain way (i.e. do what we want).

Marcie sighed, shook her head several times, sighed again, and in a small voice said, *Yes, I know he loves me. He tells me, showers me with affection and kisses, tells me how much he loves being with me. Yes, he loves me. It's something I just know and feel*. What a dilemma! On the one hand she concludes her partner doesn't love and respect her, and on the other

hand, she feels his love. Believing every thought in her head to be true is exceptionally confusing.

The next step in the process is to inquire into how we act when we treat psychological information as truthful. Marcie realized that when she acted as if love means doing what I want, she became the very behavior she feared most - disapproving. She looked at her partner with criticism; everything he did was now wrong and fuel for her wrath. I asked her, "If you treat this thought as fact, how **do** you live, who **do** you become?" Marcie said, *I become steaming and furious. I clench my teeth. I repeat to myself that he just doesn't care about me, and that he doesn't love me, or he would act differently. Then I give him the silent treatment, rejecting any gestures he makes of love. I reject him!* A bigger sigh.

But I need him to help out. I can't do this alone. This time her voice was weaker, and her tone was questioning. "Fact or opinion?" I asked. "Can you do it alone? You have been cleaning for a year. Is this true? Do you need his help?"

No. But I want it. And I think I deserve it. I don't need it, but I would prefer it. When I see the house in disarray, it hurts.

And hurt it does. It can be painful to believe and act as if our approval is determined by the actions of others. *If you loved me you would...* becomes *I need your validation so I have a right to exist*. In the quest for approval, we behave towards others in the very ways that we fear most. We become unloving, uncaring, hostile, and withholding of love and affection. We crave approval, yet walk around censorious of our friends, family and partners. We seek validation, yet criticize others as right or wrong when they fail to do what we ask.

Seeking approval consumes all of our energy, as we search endlessly for evidence of praise. We



remain on-call 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Then, when we stumble upon another person and they behave a certain way, do a distinct gesture, make a particular remark, we zero in for the kill; *ah-ha*, we say. *Here is the evidence that I am not loved, that I am unworthy, or disrespected.* Either we admit defeat and sulk, or the pendulum swings in the opposing direction, and we grow angry. *Don't you know how important I am! I have a right to my thoughts and feelings, and you are going to accept them!* All the while, we are desperate to believe the very words that feed our indignation.

The practice of examining and evaluating the thoughts to which we give power is one path to freedom. The Sutras of Patanjali begin by describing yoga as the control or cessation of thought waves in the mind or *yogah chitta vritti nirodha*. Patanjali does not tell us that yoga is the practice of postures and breathing. Those are merely means to an end, and the end is a relationship with the mind, whereby our thoughts no longer dominate our lives. We recognize them for what they are, just thoughts, nothing more, nothing less. Such realization takes the force out of the wave, wind out of the sails, and we are left with calmer seas on which to sail. The Buddha considered thoughts to be something of a sixth sense, no different from sight, smell, touch, taste, or hearing.

Over-identification with our thoughts, confusing the thoughts with the thinker, is one of the causes of suffering that Patanjali calls *asmita*, or I-Am-ness. Here we mistakenly believe that we are our thoughts, and hence focus on the "I" of the sentence – *I think, I see, I feel*, rather than simply rest and remain present to the transient thought, vision, or feeling. Most of us readily fall prey to our thoughts, letting them control us rather than the opposite. We will remain victims of our thoughts each time we follow every idea that floats across that elusive and ephemeral stage we call the mind. Patanjali, in essence, advises us that to know ourselves, we must recognize our thoughts, yet avoid over-identification with them.

Attending to the disparity between factual and psychological information enables us to gain perspective and insight, and to access understanding. Marcie allowed her thoughts to control her. When she treated her psychological information as truth, she concluded that her partner's behavior was a personal affront. Clinging to this view, the only emotional response available to her was resentment. She was overtaken by a thought, swept away on an illusionary wave of "he doesn't love me," and left adrift in a dark, uncharted sea of despair. By relinquishing her viewpoint, she became open to numerous possibilities. Where Marcie might see a stack of papers and see a mess, her partner might see an afternoon of stimulating reading. What she once viewed as a sign of rejection can now be seen as a difference in priorities and expectations. When Marcie recognizes the distinction between opin-

ion and truth, the issue of cleaning does not spiral into a verdict of his love – or of her inherent worthiness.

Today, I know that freedom of mind requires recognition, challenge and confrontation of our beliefs so that they can't take hold and thrive. I now remind myself that the process is simple. Every time we feel unloved, rejected or disapproved of, we must ask ourselves, *am I treating my opinions, psychological information, as truth?* Because when we do so, we are disconnecting ourselves from our true bliss nature. *I alone am responsible for separating myself from the world.* By examination of our thoughts we can throw a wrench in the muddled process of our thinking, and possibly achieve yoga; that is, the cessation of thought waves that bring about our suffering. By detaching from our thoughts, we may become free to reconnect with our true bliss nature. It is here that we will find the acceptance and love we seek.

At sixteen, I believed my thoughts and was certain their consequences were dire; they obscured any recognition of my true nature. In misguided longing for another's love and acceptance, I sought elsewhere for what is already within me. When I struggle at times today, I allow myself the time and space to pause and reflect, reminding myself that tormenting thought waves do indeed pass. Rather than catch each wave and ride it to a tumultuous crash, I connect to the depth of my inner being; that still, calm, supportive place that lies beneath the surface of the storm, and remember how my true nature – our true nature – is infinitely peaceful, timeless, blissful and pure.

