

# Our Inner Threat

The inner critic causes more than low self-esteem—it can also threaten the depth of our meditation practice.

By [Laura Bridgman](#) and [Gavin Milne](#)

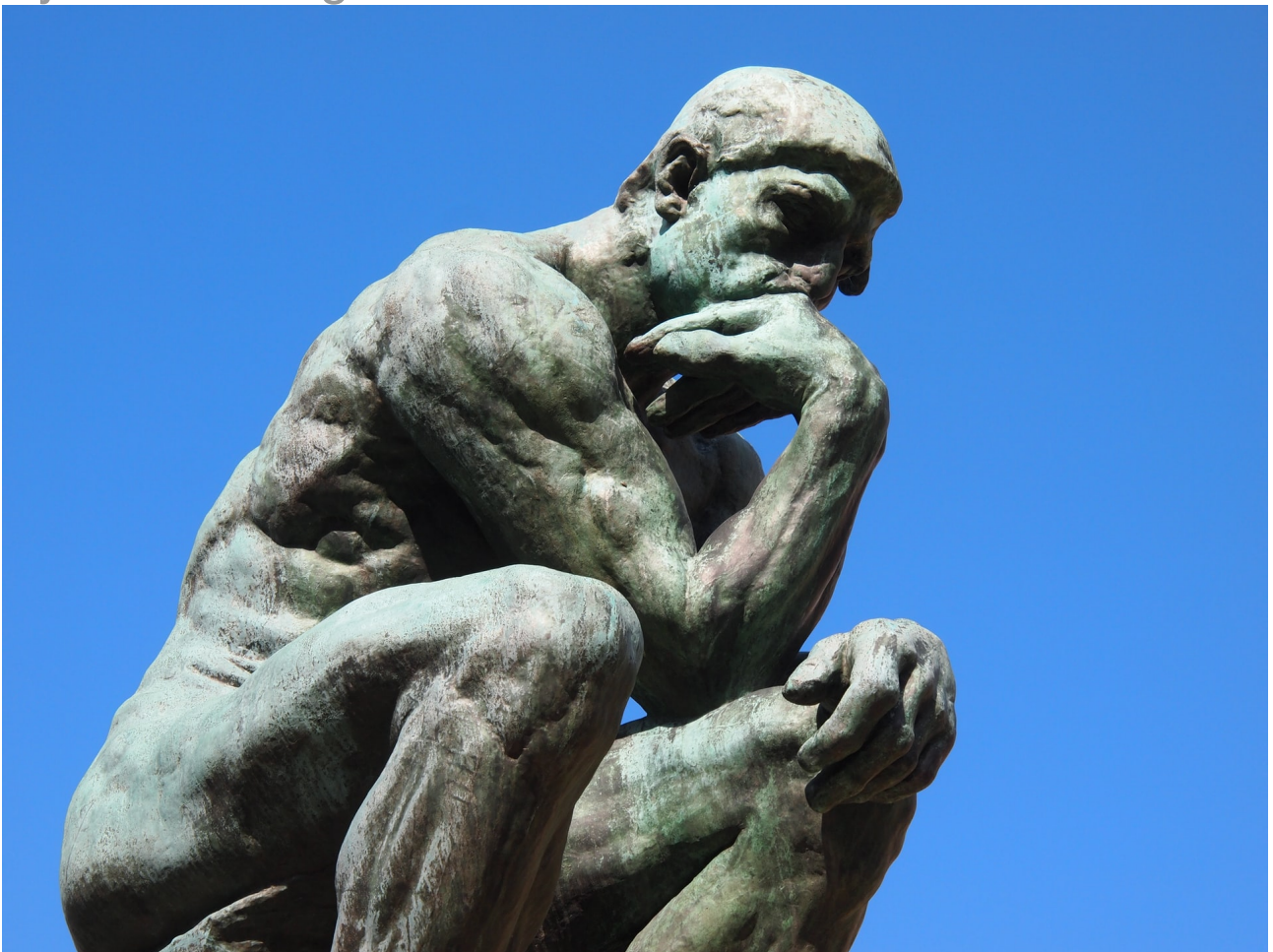


Photo by Samuel Castro | <https://tricy.cl/2LxXT82>

The inner critic is a term for an inner voice that can target anything about you—how you function, how you work, how you relate, how you communicate, how you look or come across to others, and even how you meditate. It can show up as a stream of negative comments often with the word “should,” casting aspersions on you,

dictating how you ought to be, and leaving you with a sense of deficiency and inadequacy. In the Buddha's teachings, this inner critical narrative may be understood as the hindrances of greed, aversion, and doubt.

This critical narrative differs from a constructive objective critiquing of our experience in the way it takes a particular incident, evaluates it, but then turns that judgment into a *global* assessment of who we are as a person (a sense of self we take to be valid). It takes something we said or did and frames it as a personal flaw or failing.

For instance, you lose your car keys. The inner critic then tells you: "You're useless. You never remember anything." Or, you say something that was misinterpreted or accidentally hurtful. The inner critic makes that an unambiguous assessment of your capacity to communicate and be understood: "You always say the wrong thing. You're so insensitive."

The effects of the inner critic can be slight or really harsh, and the more we're under the impact of these criticisms —felt, or in words and thoughts—the harder it makes it for us to get a clear sense of how to respond to the situation and discern what is true, and what is an add-on from the critic.

The louder this critical voice is, the more it can lead to self-doubt and self-denigration. This is where the suffering of this particular piece of mental conditioning lies. You may already have a sense of your inner critic operating in the background. When you bring this voice to the forefront of your awareness—whether in meditation or in daily life—you can start to see what

situations trigger the critic and the effects these evaluations have upon you.

Most of us are so used to this voice we don't even notice when it starts talking. We just assume it is us, and necessary. Sometimes you might even think of it as a coach or guide, motivating your best impulses and pointing you toward new goals. This voice may seem to coach you toward better things, but it attempts to motivate you by putting you down through its disparagements—and that has the opposite effect; we feel undermined and discouraged.

When it goes unnoticed, the negative effects of the inner critic can accumulate over time into a sense of low self-esteem. Our tendency becomes to doubt our immediate experience, because the inner critic says it should be other than it is.

We may have noticed how this impacts our meditation practice. For instance, instead of trusting our experience of the present moment, we feel pressured toward some other state, so we end up rejecting what is here mentally, physically, or emotionally, and that creates more stress. If we continue to engage with this loop of the inner critic, it will keep showing up. Every time we follow the inner critic we reinforce propensities toward certain actions, beliefs, perceptions, views, and attitudes that affect our internal responses and external actions. So to change the course of these propensities, we can explore how to recognise and meet these criticisms without additional judgments. We can meet them with openness, curiosity, and interest.

When we are open in this way, we see that essentially everything belongs because it simply is what it is, even our reactivity. We notice that when we actually see and understand something, it drops away; we are not following those familiar tracts in our minds. For that we need an openness and curiosity toward our thoughts, feelings, emotions, and physical sensations, supporting awareness to grow.

There is courage and effort to face and stay with the vulnerabilities of the ups and downs of our inner world, and a willingness to not follow reactivity. The central practice in this process is to return to our own direct experience in the moment. This is counter to the inner critic, which always works against letting us be just as we are. Awareness sees through the judge's attitudes and beliefs, allowing you to observe your experience with fresh eyes and be sensitive to what is arising.

We cannot simply throw off a structure that has defined and supported us unless we have something more effective with which to replace it. Sometimes we think that if we don't have the inner critic running the show we'll run riot. But as adults we have the discernment to know what is right for us in any given moment if we pause and tune in. Sensing that natural conscientiousness is real kindness toward ourselves.

When we are attuned in this way—when we are quietly centred—we can know what is needed. The more we turn toward this guidance, the less we need the guidance of the inner critical narrative and all the ways it hurts us. Everything we experience shows up for a reason. We want to understand the reasons why the inner critic

keeps coming around. This takes practice. Initially, we will recognise the impact of the inner critic after the fact, later in the day, when we're feeling unconfident or undermined. As we learn to notice these as symptoms of this inner critical voice and become more curious about it, we develop our ability to be aware of it in the moment and see what triggered it. Instead of letting the inner critic define our experience, we begin to identify this pattern, and start to choose whether or not we want to align with its perspective. We then can learn from our experiences without putting ourselves down.

Laura Bridgman began meditating in her early teens and ordained as a Buddhist nun in 1995. She was resident at Amaravati and Chithurst monasteries under the guidance of her teachers Ajahn Sumedho and Ajahn Succito. Laura left the monastic tradition in 2015 and is now Staff Support Teacher at Gaia House, a retreat centre in Devon, England. She has spent extended periods practicing with the Burmese teacher Sayadaw U Tejaniya.

Gavin Milne has been practicing Insight Meditation since 2004 and was invited to train as a teacher under the guidance of Yanai Postelnik in 2015. Inspired and influenced by other paths, Gavin is particularly interested in exploring practice wherever we find ourselves—whether in the midst of family life or responding to the wider issues of our era.