

How to refrain from elevating self above others

One day the thought may occur to us that we have actually succeeded in following our ethical principles: “I have refrained from killing life, refrained from stealing, refrained from abusing sexuality, refrained from lying and illusory speech, refrained from intoxicating mind and body of self or others, and refrained from judging others.” This thought is not a reason for celebration. This thought is a sign that we are violating our ethical principles not only if we are lying as we probably are, but also if we claim that our supposed skillful activity somehow separates us from others and distinguishes ourselves as superior to others. This claim is a violation of our ethical principles because it ignores the fundamental reality at the root of **all our ethical principles**: all beings are not separate from each other.

To see the non separation of all beings, we need only to take a pencil and a big sheet of paper and begin to draw a map of the paths of our bodies in space and time, and the paths of the stuff around us that we use every day, and the paths of our parents and other ancestors and the stuff that they used, and the paths of all other living beings and their stuff and ancestors. The map that we draw will show us that we are all inseparably together in this world; each of us came to be, and continues being, through the activity of others. If any skillful activity seems to happen through self, it actually has happened through the activity of others. Therefore, it is illusory to claim that our skillful activity distinguishes ourselves from others, and it is ignorant to praise ourselves at the expense of others.

How can we transform the illusory and ignorant mental activity that elevates self above others? How can we learn to remember and put into practice the equality and non separation of all beings?

1. NOTICE WHEN YOU MAKE SELF & OTHERS UNEQUAL

First, we practice paying attention and noticing when we see or think of self and others unequally. Inequality of self and others is a symptom of illusory and ignorant mental activity because if we see or think of self and others as unequal, then we have already implicitly distinguished between a separate self and others.

Seeing or thinking of self and others as unequal can happen in many different patterns. One pattern is the example already mentioned: we may think that we have succeeded in following our ethical principles, in contrast to others whom we think have not succeeded; or we may think that we alone have acted skillfully, and that we are unhelped by others whom we think are acting unskillfully. We may believe that we are more likely than others to be successful in following our ethical principles in the future, or more likely than others to act skillfully in the future. We may believe that our thinking is unbiased by our perspective, and that the thinking of others is biased by their perspectives. We may think that our taste is subtle and original, but that the taste of others is crude and derivative. We may be sensitive to our own joys and pains but insensitive to the joys and pains of others; or we may think that our own joys and pains are more important than the joys and pains of others. We may act kindly toward those whom we think are trying to benefit us, but unkindly toward those whom we think are trying to benefit themselves and not us. Whenever we see or think of self and others in ways such as these, we have made self and others separate and unequal.

All the examples just listed are instances of elevating self above others; inversely, it may also happen although it seems less common that we may elevate others above self. Often this consists of a simple inversion of the ways of thinking listed above: we may think that we alone have acted unskillfully, and that others are acting skillfully; we may believe that our thinking is biased, and that the thinking

of others is unbiased; we may think that our taste is crude and derivative, but that the taste of others is subtle and original; we may be sensitive to the joys and pains of others but heedless of our own; we may thwart those who are trying to benefit us, and help only those who are trying to harm us.

We may think that elevating others above self is skillful, because the heart of **all our ethical principles** is to act always for the welfare of all others, and what better way to help all others than to elevate others above self? However, when we elevate others above self, we are not acting for the welfare of *all* others in fact, we are abandoning some others: we are abandoning the subset of others that we have separated out and labeled “self.” What we have labeled “self” is not a separate being, but a community of beings: for example, this body that I call my self can be seen as a collection of innumerable cells that depend on other cells. All of those cells are others, and if we were to destroy all the cells, no separate self would remain. So elevating others above “self” merely means elevating *some* others above the rest, and this poisons our intention to act for the welfare of *all* others. Elevating others above self is based on the same illusory and ignorant mental activity that distinguishes between a separate self and others. When these patterns of mental activity become habitual, everything we see or think may become an act of elevating self above others or elevating others above self, subtly sabotaging even our best intentions.

This illusory and ignorant mental activity is based on a basic and natural asymmetry: an eye can look directly at faces that are within its range of vision, but an eye can look only indirectly via an external mirror at the face in which that eye is embedded. A brain creates a direct interior sense of the mental activity of the body in which it is embedded, but a brain creates only an indirect external sense of the mental activity of other bodies largely inferred from the external appearance and sounds of those bodies. Therefore, a brain usually

perceives the mental activity of its embedding body more easily than it perceives the mental activity of other bodies, and a brain usually perceives the external appearance of other bodies more easily than it perceives the external appearance of its embedding body. Of course, there are at least two limitations to this explanation. First, “eyes” and “brains” are processes that come to be through innumerable causes and conditions — such as water, nutrients, light, space, time, and so on — and it is just as illusory and ignorant to separate eye or brain from these causes and conditions as it is to separate self from others. Second, the range of vision of an eye, and the range of sense of a brain, is extremely restricted, so what a brain “perceives” is always partial and relative. In any case, we can see that it is easy to arrive at an unequal perception of bodies and their mental activity, and it is difficult to arrive at an equal (or at least less unequal) perception of bodies and their mental activity. Due to this basic and natural asymmetry in perception, it is easy to think of self and others unequally, but it is difficult to think of self and others equally.

Although asymmetry appears as a given in the nature of bodies, concepts of separateness and inequality are learned. We can practice paying attention to the appearance of asymmetry and to the concepts of separateness and inequality whenever they arise in our mental activity. The bad news is: we learn to create a sense of self and others that are separate and unequal, based on knowledge that is merely asymmetrical. The good news is: if separateness and inequality are learned, they can be unlearned through the practice of equalizing and exchanging self and others.

2. PRACTICE EQUALIZING & EXCHANGING SELF & OTHERS

Second, having noticed how we have made self and others separate and unequal, every day we practice two simple exercises that aim to make self and others equal.

In the first exercise, equalizing self and others, we cultivate thoughts such as: “Just as I have come to be through the activity of others, so too all other living beings have come to be through the activity of others. Just as I am always affected by the activity of others, so too all other living beings are always affected by the activity of others. Just as my own perspective is limited, so too the perspectives of all other living beings are limited. Just as I make mistakes, so too all other living beings make mistakes. Just as I intimately feel the joys and pains of this body, so too all other living beings intimately feel the joys and pains of their bodies. Just as I shun suffering and ill-being, so too all other living beings shun suffering and ill-being.

“Therefore, just as I wish to alleviate my own suffering and ill-being, so equally I wish to alleviate the suffering and ill-being of all others. Just as I take responsibility for my own mistakes, so equally I take responsibility for the mistakes of all others. Just as I seek to make sense of my own mental activity with the help of others, so equally I seek to make sense of the mental activity of all others with the help of others. Just as I seek to empathize with the joys and pains of this body, so equally I seek to empathize with the joys and pains of the bodies of all others. Just as I wish for my own happiness and well being, so equally I wish for the happiness and well being of all others.” These are the thoughts we cultivate every day.

In our actions, we aim to act in ways that match these thoughts. Our aim is to reduce the effects of the natural asymmetry in our perception, and not increase those effects, so we keep aware of the limitations of our own perspective, and we keep asking others to help us see and think beyond those limitations. We consider the needs of others as equal to our own needs: for example, if we have a bottle of water and others around us do not have bottles of water, we share the bottle of water equally with others. If possible and necessary, we could build a water provisioning system and share its water equally

with others who need it, without discriminating anyone as more or less deserving of water. This exercise has broad social implications: if social systems are not distributing resources in a way that meets the needs of all living beings equally, then we aim to do what is within our power to make those social systems more equitable, while acting in a way that does not violate our ethical principles.

In the second exercise, exchanging self and others, we visualize that is, we imagine that another is in front of us, and we meditate: “May her suffering and ill-being, together with all its causes and conditions, ripen upon me, and may I undergo its effects. May all my happiness and well being, together with all its causes and conditions, ripen upon her, and may she undergo its effects and realize unsurpassable complete awakening.” We can combine our image of the other with meditation on our breathing: when we breathe in, we can imagine that her suffering is sucked in through our nostrils, as if it were a thick smoke or noxious sludge; when we breathe out, we can imagine that all our happiness pours out around her like a blissful light or mist. In this manner we meditate individually with respect to those whom we love most; our other family members and relatives; every living being we have ever seen or heard of, from microscopic cells to humans to gigantic whales, and throughout their entire life histories from gestation to old age; those who have caused us harm, and those who may wish to cause us harm; and all living beings who are suffering. We collect upon ourselves in a single gesture the suffering and ill being of all living beings and give them all our happiness and well being, so that they have whatever they need, and with the wish that they realize unsurpassable complete awakening.

Is this exercise a way of elevating others above self? No. Because we have already practiced equalizing self and others, we are not elevating self above others or others above self. Self and others are now completely equal. “Everybody is equally smart and equally alive.”

Sometimes the best way to begin the exercise of exchanging self and others is by visualizing our “self” in front of us, or even practicing in front of a mirror or a photograph and seeing our reflected image as an other. If we cannot yet open to the suffering of our self—if we cannot welcome, or even acknowledge, our own suffering and confusion—then we are not yet able to open to the suffering of all others. So it makes sense to begin this exercise with ourselves if there are aspects of our body and mental activity that we fear or reject. Healing the separation between self and others can begin by healing the separation within ourselves not because we are elevating self above others, but because the activity we have separated out and labeled “self” is nothing but the activity of others.

Equalizing self and others helps neutralize the effects of the natural asymmetry in our perception. Exchanging self and others helps break through our emotional obstacles to realizing the non separation of self and others. We can use these exercises anywhere and at any moment, whenever we notice that we are making self and others separate and unequal.

3. REALIZE THE NON-SEPARATION OF ALL BEINGS

Third, since we have noticed how we have discriminated self and others as separate and unequal, and since we have practiced equalizing and exchanging self and others, we are now more able to realize the fundamental reality at the root of *no elevating self*: there are no separate beings that could be elevated. Everything is equal and inseparably together as the reality of life.

When we realize how our everyday actions had been more or less pervaded by illusory and ignorant mental activity that subtly elevated self above others or others above self, gradually our learned concepts of separateness and inequality wither away like dead leaves

on a severed tree branch. We reach “not the point where one no longer says I, but the point where it is no longer of any importance whether one says I.” The word “I” now denotes not a separate self but a continuously changing perspective that comes to be through vast inconceivable activity generating innumerable continuously changing perspectives.

We no longer rank living beings, and their perspectives, as being higher or lower in any way. We no longer discriminate any beings as being more or less worthy of caring and empathy and respect. We treat everyone and everything equally as the undeniable reality of life. We know that we begin to undermine our intention to live for the welfare of all others whenever we think, even subliminally: “I am not you,” “this is not that,” and so on. We reinforce our intention to live for the welfare of all others whenever we assert “I and you are not two,” “this and that are not two,” and so on, as an unconditional assumption, and on the basis of that assumption we explore the subtleties of causes and conditions.

The precept of *no judging others* invites us to deconstruct our judgments to learn about the causes and conditions of our different perspectives. The precept of *no elevating self above others* invites us to deconstruct the asymmetry in our perspectives to learn about the equality and non separation of the reality of life.

SOURCES

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Sönam Rinchen's book *The Bodhisattva Vow*, translated into English by Ruth Sönam, Ithaca: Snow Lion Publications, 2000. Much of the first section is inspired by, and some of it is paraphrased from, Emily Pronin's article "How we see ourselves and how we see others," *Science* 320 5880, May 2008. The second section is based on ancient Indian and Tibetan literature on equalizing and exchanging self and others, such as Goram Sönam Sengé's chapter "A key to the profound essential points: a meditation guide to 'Parting from the four clingings'" and other chapters in the book *Mind Training: The Great Collection*, translated into English by Thupten Jinpa, volume 1 of the Library of Tibetan Classics, Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2006. The section on exchanging self and others was also helped by Pema Chödrön's writings on the practice of *tonglen* sending and receiving. The words "Everybody is equally smart and equally alive" are from Gary Snyder's book *The Real Work: Interviews and Talks, 1964-1979*, New York: New Directions, 1980. The words "not the point where one no longer says I..." are from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's book *A Thousand Plateaus*, translated into English by Brian Massumi, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987.