

Losing Yourself: How to be a Person Without a Self

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**(Excerpts for BCBS short course:
only about 10% of the book is in this text.)**



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Chapter 7—Ethics: Abandoning the Self to Abandon Egoism

The alternative to understanding our mode of existence as that of selves is to understand ourselves as persons, that is, as beings who come into existence in open causal interaction with the rest of the world, and whose identity is constituted by the collectively constituted narrative in which are *dramatis personae*. To see oneself that way is to locate oneself in a decentered universe, in which one's location is no more special than that of anyone else. That is to see oneself as a character in a play with no special protagonists, being performed and written on the fly by a vast improv collective. This universe gives one no reason for special self-regard, or to distinguish between the moral standing of others in virtue of their relationships to oneself. This understanding of an ethical outlook is articulated in Buddhist theory through the four *divine states* (*brahmavihāras*) as *friendliness*, *care*, *sympathetic joy*, and *impartiality*.

An attitude of friendliness is one in which we wish well for others and strive to benefit them. It is an attitude of wishing well for their sake. That is to say, it is a disinterested benevolence. It must therefore be distinguished not only from its obvious antithesis—hostility—but also from its *near enemy*, partial affection. To adopt this latter attitude in which one is a good friend to those one likes, but not to others, or in which one's motivation for wishing for another's good because it is pleasant for oneself, might feel good, and might even feel like being a good friend, but it would be to reinscribe the egocentric understanding of the moral world to which this alternative vision is meant to be an antidote.

Just as to be friendly is to wish for good things for others, to be caring is to act to strive to alleviate others' pain and suffering. It is to wish to alleviate it just because it is suffering, not because of the other's relationship to oneself. That is, like true friendliness, true care is disinterested. And so, like friendliness, it must be distinguished both from its antithesis—callousness—and from its near enemy, pity, or sloppy sympathy. When we respond to another's suffering with pity or sympathy, we suffer a contagion of suffering, and consequently are impaired in our ability to act with real care. You don't want your surgeon to *feel* your pain, but to *care* for you

unimpaired by that pain. Care thus requires and reinforces a non-egocentric view of the world.

Sympathetic joy is the ability to take pleasure in the success of others. And once again, distinguishing it from its near enemy allows us to understand the way in which it both emerges from and constitutes a non-egocentric comportment to the world. The near enemy in this case is partiality, or jingoism. This is the attitude in which we rejoice in the success of those with whom we associate, or those who we take to be our friends, or to be “on our side,” while being indifferent, or even dismayed by the success of those we perceive as more distant from us in the moral landscape. Once again, that is an attitude that takes our own location to be special, and that assigns degrees of moral concern to others in terms of their proximity to us. That assignment of a special role to ourselves at the moral origin is part of the self-illusion, and sympathetic joy is inconsistent with that orientation.

This brings us naturally to the fourth of these characteristics, impartiality. That is an attitude that we can now see both as important on its own and also in virtue of the fact that it informs and is reflected in the three attitudes we have just discussed. To be impartial is to adopt the same moral attitude, and to extend the same level of friendship, care, and sympathetic joy to all in one’s environment, regardless of their relation to oneself, regardless of whether one sees them as close to one, or distant, supportive or hostile. It is to forego revenge, and partiality. It is not a refusal of affection or goodwill to one’s intimates, but to be willing to extend that natural fellow-feeling indefinitely, and so to assign a kind of homogeneity to the moral world.

Together these attitudes encapsulate a complete abandonment of egocentricity in moral experience. The egocentricity they undermine is the moral side of regarding oneself as *a self*. To see things from the egocentric perspective reflecting the view of a self is to remove oneself from *membership* in the world and to adopt the position of an *experiencer* of the world and *agent* acting on it. Its inevitable consequence is—at best—the adoption of the near enemies of these four

virtuous states as one's mode of comportment, substituting rationally defensible, beneficial attitudes with irrational, and ultimately destructive ones, made all the worse because they can masquerade so effectively as virtue.

To the extent that we recognize these divine states as constituting a moral ideal, and as reflections of a rational way to understand our own place in the moral world, we see that is both rational and morally important to shed the self illusion.

Chapter 9: Being in the World: Embedded, Embodied, Enacting our Personhood

Why do we value one another? Why do we and our fellows merit respect, rights, consideration, and kindness? That is another way of asking the question, "what is special about people? We care about one another, take one another's desires and welfares seriously, respect one another's rights, and treat one another with consideration to the degree that we embrace one another in a moral and social community. That is, moral valuation depends on seeing one another as *together* in a shared world. This does not require that we agree about everything, or that our projects are the same. We can respect and honor those with whom we share little in the way of beliefs, values, or way of life. But moral respect and recognition does require that we see one another as potential fellows in a larger sense: as playing analogous roles in the human world.

Our ability to care about others, including distant others we have never met, arises from our ability to see others as sharing in this grand project. For if the project in which we see ourselves as agents—the project of life—is sufficient to give meaning to our own lives, it is also sufficient to give meaning to those others who join us in that project. Just as Hamlet gains his significance in *Hamlet*, so to do Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and they matter to one another precisely because they are part of the same drama. When we recognize each other in this sense, we recognize our *interdependence*, not our *independence*; our roles and commitments, not our subjectivity; our participation in a shared world, not our spectatorship of a

world of which we are independent. In short, this kind of moral and political recognition is the recognition of *persons*, not of *selves*.

When we adopt this attitude, we do not see ourselves and others as isolated, independent selves who happen to find one another in a featureless abstract landscape, and then have to figure out whether and how to relate to one another. Instead, we see one another as persons who share a world pregnant with the meaning; meaning that we collectively create, and which in turn shapes our lives. In seeing one another in this way, we come to appreciate the way we co-constitute one another, and the ways in which we are responsive and responsible to one another.

Selves could never facilitate our moral or collective lives; they could only get in the way. That is why Dōgen writes that “to study the self is to forget the self; to forget the self is to cast of body and mind; to cast of body and mind is to be affirmed by all things.” This affirmation is, and can only be, the affirmation of our shared personhood.

Chapter 10 Getting Over Yourself: Drawing this All Together

One might have thought that the discovery that we have no self, no *ātman*, no *psyche* would be the discovery that we are somehow less than we thought we were. But we have seen that this is wrong. Our lives are better for the fact that we are self-less persons than they could ever have been were we selves.

When people first hear about the idea of selflessness, they often think that this is the idea that we don't really exist. But that only makes sense if you think that to exist is to be a self. Once we see that the self is illusory, though, we see that that can't be right. The fact that a dollar is not a piece of paper does not mean that dollars don't exist, and the fact that we are not selves doesn't mean that we do not exist. Instead, for beings like us, to exist is to be a person—a socially constituted being embedded in a rich and meaningful world. To deny that we are persons would be to deny that we exist. So, the self illusion, although it seems to confer a greater reality on us than would mere conventional personhood, in fact undermines the very

reality that makes us who we are. To accept that you have no self is not to reject your identity; it is to reclaim your humanity.

The finer the hair, the more important it is to split it.

Sandy Huntington