

# Reclaiming Authenticity in a World of Impressions

By **Acharya Prashant** - November 24, 2024



Right since our birth, we are trained to conduct ourselves according to others' expectations. Everything about us seems to come from outside; every single identity is social. We write in prescribed ways, speak in acceptable tones, worship in traditional patterns, hold sanctioned beliefs about life, and shape our responses to please family, peers and lords. This conditioning runs so deep that we unconsciously continue our perpetual performances. The same pattern extends seamlessly into professional life as well, where the stakes of impressing others appear even higher, and the consequences of failing to do so seem more dire.

In today's world, where lives seem to be lived online, this tendency manifests most visibly on social media. Here, genuine expression often takes a backseat to calculated performance. We carefully curate content designed to sparkle in followers' eyes, prioritising potential 'likes' over authentic insights. Our posts become exercises in strategic timing and careful editing rather than authentic sharing. This behaviour stems from a fundamental desire for recognition and respect, yet we must question: What value truly exists in such carefully manufactured presentations?

When we examine this compulsion to impress others, we find that at its core, it is an attempt to impact minds. If such influence is inevitable, why not channel it toward genuinely beneficial ends? The problem lies not in the act of making an impression, but in the hollow motivation behind it—the mere gratification of ego. This pursuit of external validation often leaves us feeling more empty than fulfilled, trapped in an endless cycle of seeking approval that can never truly satisfy.

Look to history's influential figures—leaders, thinkers, spiritual guides. Their impact often came through complete immersion in their work. Most of them did not even target to be impactful, and many gained recognition long after they were gone. Some found

themselves admired simply through dedication to their craft, while others shaped thoughts and beliefs in ways that blessed all concerned. Their influence stemmed not from ego but from meaningful contribution. These individuals understood, either intuitively or through wisdom, that true impact comes not from seeking admiration but from offering genuine value. This is what is also at the heart of Bhagavad Gita—the doctrine of desireless action, which is to be immersed so completely in the value of the action that you forget desiring the fruit of the action.

Most attention-seeking behaviour stems from uncertainty about one's own worth, resulting in a desperate need for external validation to feel secure. Such behaviour serves neither the seeker nor the giver of attention. The validation received feels hollow because deep down, the receiver knows it was obtained through contrived manipulation rather than authentic expression. This recognition only deepens the underlying insecurity, creating a vicious cycle of seeking even more approval.

Is it possible to pause for a while and look at oneself? Instead of chasing acknowledgment from others, can we reflect on what is it within that bases its very sustenance on external recognition? Who sits within me and craves for social approval? Is it the authentic me, or is it rather a superimposition over my authentic self? When we give attention to the desirous one within, we find that most of its values are not internal. It has been trained and conditioned to desire a lot, including the desire to be socially recognised. The more lucidly we see this, the more reduced stands the urge to operate like a puppet to some unknown puppeteer. And then it is possible to get rid of fake representation and come to authentic expression.

An extraordinary transformation now occurs. And with it comes genuine relationship. With self-knowledge, when one expresses herself purely and directly, it turns out to be the best service one can render to others. It is strange—when you are too concerned with others, you mostly end up losing your true self, and when you lose your trueness, you cannot be of any help to others. Whereas when you are primarily concerned with being authentic, true help automatically radiates to others in unplanned and unknown ways. That's at the heart of spiritual mysticism.

When you are free of care about yourself, then you become free to take care of others. The first thing is to reclaim your own freedom from the world. And once you are inwardly free, then you will inevitably bring value to others' lives. Think of the Buddha who left his palace and the throne, discovered himself, and then returned to the society in the most impactful way possible. Buddha or Krishna – though we might hesitate to call them 'impression-makers' – they undeniably occupy central places in billions of minds. Their enduring influence demonstrates the profound impact that's possible when one enters others' lives not to extract value for personal gain, but to express ourselves in the truest way possible. They exemplify the possibility of influencing others without the burden of self-interest, showing us a path toward meaningful contribution that overshadows the need for personal validation.

Every relationship inevitably creates mutual impressions. It's impossible to interact without leaving some imprint on each other's minds. If such impression-making is unavoidable, why not approach it with the highest possible purpose, benefiting both ourselves and others? This understanding liberates us from the anxiety of impression

management and allows us to focus on the quality of our contributions rather than the perception of our performance.

External admiration cannot fill internal void. Someone who thinks of themselves as being inferior cannot find completion through others' approval. No amount of skilfully manipulated admiration can substitute for genuine self-worth. The admiration of others offers little solace to those who do not hold themselves in right regard. It is, therefore, far more valuable to approach others from a place of inner assurance than to seek from them that which they anyway cannot provide. This brings a fundamental shift in our interactions and relationships—they are no more opportunities to gather validation, but chances to contribute meaningfully to others' lives. When relationships emerge from this perspective, we find that the recognition we once sought so desperately comes naturally—though, ironically, by then, we are free from the need of it.

The way forward lies not in perfecting a rehearsed performance but in finding the truth of who we are. The method for that is honest observation of our usual thoughts and activities. Once it is seen that most of our values, desires and goals are just external implants, that which is needless gets dropped effortlessly. The suffocation and indignity one endures for living a second-hand life too goes. One sees that the search for security through external validation is a fruitless endeavour. And then one helps others truly—one's spontaneous expression becomes an instrument of help. There is a profound difference between seeking to falsely impress and choosing to truly express – the first pulls everybody down, including the self, and the latter serves the world.

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