

Beyond the Separate Self: Transcending the Illusion of Separation

By **Acharya Prashant** - December 1, 2024



As humans, we often find ourselves trapped in an elaborate illusion—the belief that life is a perpetual negotiation between self-interest and collective welfare.

There is a centre within from where we feel that working for oneself is different from, and even opposed to, working for others. From this centre, life appears like a zero-sum game, where every gain to oneself implies a loss to someone else. We are conditioned to assume the world almost as a battlefield where personal desires clash with public welfare, and where human progress implies an inevitable loss to the environment. This reduces life to a complex calculus of competition, survival, and even violence.

This division between personal and universal welfare raises an important question: Who is it within us that draws these lines, pitting us against one another? For most of what we consider to be our values and desires are not truly our own. They are borrowed ideas and expectations coming from society, culture, and upbringing, unconsciously absorbed by us over time. As an Indian you might be an ardent cricket fan. But would you still love cricket if you were born in Russia? Exploring such questions reveal the fragility of our constructed identities and consequent likes and dislikes. Our attachment to the separate self is largely based on accidents of birth and circumstance that we've mistaken for our

core essence.

Then there is the other centre within us. We don't usually operate from this centre. But when we do, we see that our interests and those of others are inseparable. We also see that if we try to take care of only your own personal, limited interests, then we will not be able to take care of even our own interests. That's the centre of clarity, from where both the perceiver and the perceived gain lucidity. We begin to see that our interests and others' interests aren't just related – they're fundamentally inseparable. When we genuinely serve our authentic needs, we naturally create value for others.

Consider the Bhagavad Gita to see how what is liberative for the individual is auspicious for the society. Superficially, it may appear as if Krishna is urging Arjuna to fight for the throne. Yet, the Gita is not at all about kingdom or personal victory. Arjuna is being told to follow his swadharma (one's own individual discretion for the sake of one's liberation). Swadharma is what leads to joy and freedom for the individual. And this personal swadharma is naturally in line with the greater common good. The principle is: If you do what is truly right for you, you have done what is right for the world.

Contrastingly, Duryodhana's pursuit of the throne is just personal ambition, with complete disregard for the general good. Ambition is not right even for the one holding the ambition. So, on the internal side, it would have meant that Duryodhan would have remained discontented even after winning the war. On the external side, it would have meant a governance that would bring suffering to the population in general. What is not good for the individual cannot be good for the society.

How to align personal goals with the well-being of others? Let us firstly see who the goal-setter is. The one who sits within and sets goals is the ego. The ego, by definition, founds itself on separation from the world. The dualistic dissonance inherent in the 'me versus world' narrative is the life-story of the ego. Even a child perceives, 'I am born in a world– there is me, and there is world, and the two of us are together but always separate, and the world is a competitive place of opportunities and threats'. So, when the ego sets goals for itself, they too are bound to conform to the 'me versus world' story. Like all either-or binaries, the identity and goals of the ego too are self-serving at the cost of the general world. The ego, the goal-setter, sets a flawed identity for itself, and acts in aggression and fear because of this identity. Can the goals change if the one setting the goals continues to remain the same? Must we then ask how to have generous and benevolent goals? Or must we first examine where our current goals are coming from?

Our current goals are nothing but a reflection of the ignorance and insecurities of the goal-setting ego. Since this is not seen clearly, we continue to assume that our goals are made of nobler stuff. In absence of self-knowledge, the ego continues to hold a rather high opinion of itself. What do we continuously, though mostly unconsciously, desire or target? Is it not the gratification of the self, repetition of pleasure, and accumulation of a hollow sense of security?

Self-observation is about seeing the deeper motive behind one's thoughts, feelings, plans and actions. When one looks honestly at herself, it becomes obvious that what one deeply needs is not an accumulation of possessions or praise but the dissolution of the one who can never be contended with any accumulation. True fulfilment comes not from ingratiating the ego but from understanding it. This profound longing to becalm the self by understanding has been called love – not a love for external acquisition but for inner extinction. It is a desperate and fundamental need to stop clinging to what we are not. From this deeper centre of understanding, the illusion of separation dissolves. We see clearly that the 'internal' doer is an entity arising from the content and influence of 'external' world. Most of our desires arise from the bodily chemicals that we have no

control over, and cannot be called as personal or exclusive to us. Similarly, the mind too is made up of influences and imprints of society and upbringing. How do we then claim to be separate from the world? Is there anything unique or exclusive to a person? Seen with humility and honesty, the boundaries between self and others are artificial. This seeing makes it obvious that the personal self and the larger world are inseparable.

What is the result of such a realisation? The ego is forced to take a hard look at itself, its belief in ignorance drops, and the force behind its desires reduces. This is the process of liberation from false identities and false goals that we have inadvertently accumulated. This liberation from the separated self is the dissolution of the need to operate in an either-or paradigm. Not operating from a point of ignorance, one does not set exclusive goals for herself. Then, like in nature, the flow of thoughts and actions effortlessly ceases to be exclusive. This could be called either a dropping of personal desire, or an expansion of personal desire to include all.

To be free of self-concern is to become truly capable of effortlessly serving others, even without planning for any magnanimity. This is also the Bhagavad Gita—the doctrine of desireless action. True harmony begins when we let the inner false barriers drop – unleashing authenticity that soothes the world we are.

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