

Equalizing Self and Others

by Kokyo Henkel

The bodhisattva's vow to alleviate the suffering of all sentient beings is truly awesome, beyond awesome. It may even seem impossible to really relate to the world in this way. If it is possible, the main thing it comes down to is the knowing and feeling in our heart that others are really not separate from us, that our well-being is not more important than that of others. We've probably heard this many times, but actually experiencing life that way doesn't come naturally or easily for anyone. Thus we have teachings and practices to help us. Teachings point us in the right direction, and as we come to understand and remember them, again and again, our mind can start to shift gradually, and our view of how things are can actually change. The more we align our life and practice with the teachings, the more we taste their truth.

For example, we can make a point of recalling how ourselves and others are completely interdependent. We can't actually survive more than a few hours when we are first born without the kindness and support of others. Then, throughout the rest of our life, we are completely dependent upon others in a way that is easy to forget and take for granted. Every time we eat, every time we drink water from a faucet, every time we have a warm place to sleep on a cold night, is all due to the support of others. To intentionally remember this again and again actually starts to change the mind, and opens us to appreciate others more deeply.

One of the greatest teachers of the bodhisattva path is Shantideva, who lived in eighth century India. In Chapter 8 of his "Way of the Bodhisattva," he writes about equalizing self and others. This is more than just equanimity, it is seeing that there really is no fundamental difference between self and others. Shantideva says, "Since I and other beings are both equal in wanting happiness, what difference is there to distinguish us, that I should strive for happiness for myself alone? Since I and other beings are both equal in not wanting to suffer, what difference is there to distinguish us, that I should save myself and not the others?" Of course this makes sense logically – why should our suffering be more important than that of any others? But this truth does not sink into our heart. The way we are conditioned as human beings is to experience ourself as a separate individual and as the most important one. That's how we got here, at the top of the evolutionary ladder; those who put themselves first are the ones who survived. So this way of thinking that doesn't really make sense is deep in our genetic structure, and no small matter to undo. Through continuous familiarity with this new way of looking at our life, gradually we can start to change.

Shantideva continues, "Suffering has no 'possessor,' therefore no distinctions can be made in it. Since pain is pain, it is to be dispelled. What use is there in drawing boundaries between my pain and yours?" Pain is simply pain. It's not that it is mine or yours. It belongs to nobody, it is kind of impersonal, since there is no real "self" to possess anything. Suffering always seems to have the location of a particular sentient being, but it doesn't matter which one; the bodhisattva's vow is to alleviate all suffering.

"Just as in connection with this body, devoid of self, the sense of 'I' arose through strong habituation, why should not the thought of 'I,' through habit, not arise related to another?" With the thought "I", the view of myself here as this individual body and mind comes to be. This way

of thinking, that we all have, arose very early on, soon after our birth, and it continued to arise through habituation. We kept thinking and saying "I" over and over until we really believed that this body and mind is separate from others and more important than others; this is the result of habituation. So then why couldn't the thought of "I" through further habituation – called practice – not arise with respect to another? In other words, this mind can be trained to think of "I" as all of us, as a much larger self. As the Chinese Zen Teacher Changshan once said, "In the entire world of the ten directions, there is not a single person who is not myself."

Is it possible to really change our perception like that? Isn't this kind of like undoing evolution? That seems to be the proposal of the ancient buddhas and bodhisattvas. Admittedly it may take a long time, but the mind is infinitely flexible. Though our habits are deeply entrenched, in fact they can change. It's a matter of first understanding this new way of thinking of all of us as one body, and then rethinking it again and again and again. This may sound like a lot of thinking for a Zen practitioner, but if we don't train the conceptual mind, it's not just going to automatically change. How about just dissolving the boundaries of self and others in zazen, letting go of all conceptual thought? We need to do this too, to directly taste the freedom of not conceptualizing our separation. If we combine zazen with remembering these teachings over and over – "mindfulness" can also be translated as "remembering" – then this may be the most effective way to stir up and dissolve our ancient twisted habits.

How about some practical modern applications of this kind of mind-shifting? The contemporary ethics philosopher Peter Singer has two books that are closely related to Shantideva's teaching of equalizing self and others. In "Animal Liberation" he brings up the reasons why people don't treat animals the same as they treat humans – not to mention the same as themselves. This is what he calls "speciesism" which is exactly the same principle as racism and sexism, but a biased delusion we often don't notice. People sometimes say that since animals are not as intelligent as humans, their life is not as valuable; therefore killing an animal is very different from killing a human. Much of the human world generally holds this kind of unconscious belief. Peter asks: if we really base the worth of a life on intelligence, then what about an adult pig versus a newborn human infant? Actually an adult pig may be more intelligent than a newborn infant. The infant has the potential to become more intelligent than the pig, but actually in terms of value right now, which life would be worth more right now, if intelligence is the main criterion? If we really start looking at our underlying beliefs and inconsistencies, they may start to fall apart. We usually don't want to do this because it brings up big implications for our lives. Peter asks what is the appropriate basis upon which we should decide whether it is ethical or not to kill life. Intelligence is not the point. Basically, it all comes down to suffering, the being's ability to suffer and feel pain, which is what Shantideva says as well: that all sentient beings are equal in that they all want basic well-being and they all want to be free from suffering.

It does seem pretty clear that animals with any kind of nervous system, even insects, try to move away from suffering and danger, and towards comfort and safety. Even if they are not rational and intelligent beings, they seem to suffer and feel pain. The more rational and intelligent beings, like us, seem to suffer more, when we think about pain in the past or the future. Other animals are a little more free of that than we are, but they surely feel pain and want well-being. When Peter Singer began to really look into this kind of reasoning as a basis for killing or protecting

life, contemplating the equalizing of self and others, he became vegetarian. His life actually changed in a major way, based on his opening to a deeper truth.

Another book by Peter Singer, called "The Life You Can Save," also has powerful arguments similar to Shantideva's, pointing out our unconscious biases to break down the division between caring for ourselves and other people. Peter asks us to imagine coming upon a child drowning in a lake when nobody else is there to help her. Would we go into the lake to save her life, even if it meant ruining our new shoes? Of course, a human life is worth more than our shoes. But what if the child is dying in Africa due to lack of medical treatment that costs the same amount as our shoes? Would we spend that amount on aid to save the life of a child? Though many people feel that this kind of aid is not reasonable, since it's just a drop in the bottomless bucket of extreme poverty, what if our own child was that particular "drop in the bucket"? This way of looking at things is quite disconcerting. After examining such ethical arguments, opening to equalizing self and others, Peter Singer ended up changing his life again; he set up an organization called "The Life You Can Save" which researches the most efficient aid organizations around the world that help sick and dying people, and then recommends that we donate a small part of our income to help the poorest of the poor. Actually, if everybody in first world countries donated a small percentage of their income to the most efficient organizations, it could completely eliminate world poverty and prevent countless deaths. Courageous bodhisattvas are willing to look into their unconscious biases, train their minds in equalizing self and others, and joyfully benefit living beings in all kinds of practical ways.