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The Individual and the Person*

-from aggressive competition to mutually helpful cooperation

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Modern cultural values are skewed in favour of the individual. It is difficult to be a person. A person is horizontally pitched, related to other human beings, and being horizontal, closer to the earth. It is these relationships with others and with the earth that brings realisation and fulfillment to a person. The individual, on the other hand, is on a vertical journey, climbing to the top, seeing others as threats. As individuals we have been primed to succeed, to get to the top, and to see others as obstacles to be overcome. But experience and reflection teaches us that there is more to life than the usual compulsions that drive us; that caring and being cared for are more desirable than the 'dog eat dog' attitude that has come to plague our civilisation. The individual cannot care; only the person can.

An old story goes as follows: A teenage ant, trying to figure out what life is all about, was walking down Main Street looking at the shop windows that were exhibiting consumer goodies. The young ant paused now and then to look at the displays. They were interesting enough and she would have loved to buy many of them if she had the money. But then, she was on a quest to discover the larger meaning of life and would not rest till she had found it. Window shopping, fulfilling as it might be, was not enough to satisfy her. Continuing to walk down Main Street she heard a faint chant emerging in the distance. Curiosity aroused, she hurried towards the chant, entranced by its mesmerising quality. As she got closer she saw a structure that looked like a pyramid. But it could also have been a temple, church or mosque. The youthful ant was now running, totally enthralled by the chant emerging in the distance.

When she got close enough she found that it was not really a temple, church or mosque, but a hill of ants... hundreds of thousands of them. Each ant was clambering upon the other trying to race up the hill of ants. They kicked and screamed frantically as they moved in their journey to the top. Passionately, they chanted a mesmerising line: 'Got to get to the top! Got to get to the top!' The young ant found an overwhelming excitement and energy welling up inside her. Before long she joined the other ants, chanting 'Got to get to the top! Got to get to the top!' She crawled upon the other ants, hitting out and yelling as she pushed her way to the top. The frenzied kicking, screaming and chanting went on and on and several ants were crushed and badly wounded. Finally the young ant, swept by the momentum, was hurtled to the top. She was amazed at what she saw. "There's nothing at the top!" she exclaimed in stupefaction. "There's absolutely nothing up here."

"Hush," said the ant that came after. "There may be nothing here, but let's not tell anybody."

The top held significance only as long as the others below were deluded to think that there was something extraordinarily fulfilling up there.

The historical significance of the story needs to be explained further. An intellectual stream of great import, known as The Enlightenment, emerged in Europe in the 18th century, which profoundly altered the notion of the human being. Up to then the churches, the feudal lords and the restrictive guilds held a stranglehold on individual freedoms and advancement. The liberal and intellectual currents of the Enlightenment, with their emphasis on reason and intellectual progress, took the human being out of the stranglehold of the church, the feudal structures, the family and the clan. The natural child of the Enlightenment was the philosophy of Individualism that declared that the individual was a superior construct compared to the understandings of previous ages which curbed freedom. All individuals were in some sense morally equal in the Enlightenment. But with the evolution of an aggressive market economy the Individual began to emphasise self-interest above everything else.

Individualism, which at one point was seen as a progressive current, finds itself today in crisis, because of its identification with the fiercely competitive attitude of 'win-lose'. It is an axiom of market fundamentalism that some will win and others lose, that some will rise to wealth and fame while others may be trampled upon materially and emotionally. Today the individual is geared to compete from primary school through university to professional life. Like the young ant she is geared to reach the top.

The prevailing vision of human existence is vertical, to climb over each other to get to the top. Only one set of human drives is to the fore: those of power, money, possession and competition.

Other drives, the horizontal ones, of caring and loving, fellowship and interconnectedness, are neglected and are showing signs of atrophy. There is a difference between being an Individual, and being a Person. A person is certainly an autonomous being. But she is also an interdependent being, for her destiny is interwoven with the destinies of others and the earth-mother herself. The person is one who is aware that the quest for excellence cannot be confused with the paranoia to get to the top. She knows that our ability to pay attention to detail and value 'rigour' need not be aggressive or inordinately competitive. Kindness, caring and friendship are equally, if not more, important.

Buddhism says that nothing is permanent, and the cause of all suffering is to hold on to the illusion of permanence. The consumer goodies we buy are not permanent, the modest or giddy heights we aspire to are not permanent. Each cell in our bodies is racing to extinction. If we were to grasp this central truth we would be happier persons. But the notion of impermanence is usually so frightening that we prefer not to dwell on it. Instead we are drawn to the make believe world of consumer advertisements and the power of being at the top.

The Buddhist thinker David Loy puts it succinctly with his notion of lack. We experience lack as a huge hole in the core of our being, a sense of ungroundedness that terrifies us. This ungroundedness is the result of a cluster of always changing mental processes that cannot be secured. The monkey mind is always active, leaving us with a feeling of being unfinished, lacking something important. We flee from this lack and try to fill the hole with the quest for money, power, sex, being a celebrity and so forth. The teenage ant in our story is dealing with her sense of lack through sharpening her competitive instincts to get to the top. In an interview with Tom McFarlane, David Loy says,

“But if we open up to that ungroundedness at our core, if we can let go and yield to it, then we find that it’s the source of our creativity and our spirituality, that at the very core of our being there’s something else there, something formless that can be grasped, something that transcends the self and yet is the ground of the self.”

Only an unconditioned, deconstructed (and reconstructed) person can experience the wonder and the transcendence of ungroundedness. The individual, presently a product of market fundamentalism and our consumer wasteland, was pronounced spiritually dead some time ago. Fortunately, many are now aware that this kind of individualism would drive us crazy. It is likely that hyper-individualists may not see the value of the time spent with children, spouses, companions and friends; and the time spent in nature. Many of us are aware that there is much more to life than the low-grade stimulation that mere ambition, power, money and information can bring us. We also realise that we need not become saints to tilt the balance in favour of compassion and joy.

*This is a series of four consecutive essays by Siddhartha on Individualism, the Self, Interbeing and Eco-dharma