

## See the Connection, Not the Differences

By [Harrison Barnes](#)

There is a famous story about Charles Darwin hiking through the countryside in England with his friend:

"There's an abundance of clover here," observed Darwin. "This district must have many widows." The two strolled on, Darwin enjoying the country air, his friend lost in deep contemplation. At last, the friend tugged the great scientist's sleeve. "What has clover to do with widows?" he asked. Darwin smiled and explained, "An abundance of clover needs many healthy swarms of bees to pollinate it. Thriving bee hives mean there are few rats to raid and ravage them. A scarcity of rats spells an abundance of cats. Who keeps and feeds packs of cats? Widows, of course."

In Buddhism there is a principle known as Pratityasamutpada. Its most literal translation is *the together rising up of things*. What this means, essentially, is that all things are interdependent. Each individual person, place, or thing in the world is the result of a collaborative process and a combination of many interrelated elements.

Buddhism sets forth that a large part of our unhappiness comes from our failure to grasp this concept of Pratityasamutpada. Instead of seeing ourselves as interdependent and in relation to all things, we see ourselves as separate, and we set up belief systems that maintain and enforce this fallacy of thought.

I am fascinated by the way people have historically communicated using various symbols. A fun place to visit if you are ever in Las Vegas is the King Tut museum. Museums of ancient history such as this consistently demonstrate the symbols that different cultures have used throughout history to communicate.

Whether you look at the pyramids in Egypt, the cave paintings in France or in rural parts of the United States, prehistoric art in China--or elsewhere--ancient cultures have all used similar symbols. One of the most dominant symbols that different peoples have used is an animal with wings; this particular symbol is often worshiped. It could be a winged bull, winged snake, winged horse, or winged dragon. Regardless of the particulars, this image appears throughout various cultures time and time again. The idea of animals (other than birds) having wings seems to be celebrated by virtually all civilizations.

Wings are symbolic of freedom. They represent becoming something powerful, unique, and enlightened. Having wings seems to elevate a creature to an almost godlike status, whereby it is empowered to break free from all limitations.

In addition to appearing in prehistoric art, winged creatures also appear as the subject of numerous myths throughout various cultures. In many of these myths, an animal (or sometimes a person) goes into isolation and emerges with wings. In other stories, such as the legend of the phoenix, a bird dies in a fire, and from the ashes emerges a new, revitalized phoenix. All of these ancient symbols seen in art and mythology represent the process or journey of transformation that is undertaken by all forms of life.

Most of us have an innate desire to transform ourselves. We believe that deep down there is something that is imperfect with us, which can be made better--and we want to *rise above* the world and our conditions within it. Because our desire to experience transformation is so important to us, it is something that we should honor.

The idea of becoming something better and more significant than we are is valued by all people. At the same time, the need to transform, escape, and rise above seems inconsistent with our general concept of happiness. *How can we be happy and value our place in the world when we are always seeking to become something different from what we in fact are?* The desire to get away and to rise above is a sign that we perceive ourselves as separate from and inferior to others.

The cause of most of our problems is the separateness that we feel and experience in relation to others. Most warfare, for example, is the result of one group of people feeling separate from others. The root of most problems is the perception of *me* and *not me*. Society emphasizes the survival of individual people. Further, there is a psychological sort of survival that seems to be stressed. For example:

- We want not only to be loved but to be more loved than another.
- We want not only to be significant but to be more significant.

We are always seemingly competing with those around us, hoping to become better than they. More than anything else we are concerned about how we seem in comparison to others.

I have had two interesting experiences I want to share with you. One took place several years ago and the other happened yesterday.

Around five years ago, I purchased a small house on the water in Malibu, California. One day I had some relatives visiting, and one relative said something I will never forget: "This house will probably impress people for a while, and when it stops being impressive to your friends, you can get a bigger one."

I heard this statement and was a little taken aback. The house was a weekend house, where I used to relax when I could get away from the office on the weekends. However, this person viewed the house only as a social climbing tool, something that I had purchased only for how it would make me look in relation to others. This is how many people think:

- We get a new house because of how it makes us look in relation to others.
- We get a new car because of how it makes us look in relation to others.
- We [get a new job](#) or take on a certain project because of how it makes us look in relation to others.
- We take a fancy vacation because of how it makes us look in relation to others.
- We purchase an expensive piece of clothing because of how it makes us look in relation to others.
- We participate in a certain extracurricular activity because of how it makes us look in relation to others.

All of these things are often part of our competition to obtain significance and to transcend others. This need to transcend

others is something that ends up creating many problematic issues in our lives.

Yesterday I found out that the gardener at a property I am doing some work on is very upset with me. He is installing some lights on a property that I rent out for weddings, and he is doing the work for around \$5,000, the amount he stated in his bid. However, he recently found out that we charge more than this for a wedding at the property.

"It is not fair they make this much money off one wedding and I am only making such a small amount of money for the lights," he started telling other people. His entire attitude has changed and he is now angry and resentful on the job, rather than thankful to have secured the work at his price. He is installing the lights in a crooked way.

I realize that this may sound outrageous, but it is an incredibly common thing. We judge ourselves in relation to others, and when we do not feel that we measure equally up, we get angry. It is none of his business how much a wedding costs at the property and this fact is entirely unrelated to the lights. However, like most people do, this person is separating himself by measuring himself in relation to others--and it does not seem to make much sense.

*Do you measure yourself against others?* Do you feel more or less significant, or happy in your life, depending upon how others are doing? It would make sense if you did. Almost everyone is guilty of this sort of thought process.

I have always loved watching people of various backgrounds who are extremely spiritual. One of the draws of many religions for people is the idea that if they become more observant of their chosen religion, they will become more godlike, or somehow better than those who are less observant. In this respect, religion and spirituality are often another way for people to feel as if they are transcending others.

We are always going to struggle to find our place in the world as long as we are fighting an inner sense of lack and striving for significance in relation to others. Science, technology, and other improvements we are interested in, are all things that we use to help us feel transcendent in relation to others. I know of several people who purchase a new cell phone every few months, whenever the model with more features comes out. They are constantly showing others their new cell phone and comparing it with the cell phones of their friends. Having the [latest technology](#) becomes part of this competitive sense.

The solution to most of our problems lies in seeing that we are connected with everything around us. Where we are in our career and life is the result of how well connected we are to those around us. When you see your connection to others and you do not try and emphasize the differences, a sense of peace comes over you and you are able to see the world and your life more clearly. You can then contribute to the world in a more pure way, leading you toward a more fulfilling and *less separate* existence.

### THE LESSON

You will find much greater success and contentment by focusing on your connections to others rather than your differences. While all people see themselves as separate entities, you must remember that all things and people are interdependent. Your position in your life and career results from how well connected to the people around you, not your relative difference or transcendence.

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