

OTHER – EXPANDED

In this handout we are going, as we did with 'Self - Expanded', to offer you greater insight into this aspect of awareness by exploring its strengths and weaknesses. As we pointed out in The Three Aspects of Consciousness a healthy, fully functioning individual is not someone who is trapped in any one aspect of consciousness. They are able to move fluidly between all three positions depending on the circumstances and situation. The fully functioning individual understands that it is their view of the world that can cause the most pain or indeed liberate them and so they choose their perspectives wisely, knowing that each position (point of view) has its own advantages and disadvantages. Let us explore both of these here, as they relate to 'other', because there is no doubt that a better understanding of this subject gives us greater access to the wonders of awareness.

Advantages

The healthy position of 'other' is a place of awareness capable of incredible empathy. It's a position that can suspend its subjective view of a situation and the world and walk in another person's shoes. It hears what is being said not through its own ears but through the ears of another. It tries to see the world as that person is seeing and feeling it and also understand it from their perspective. So, as the teenager expresses angst and confusion about his emotional, biological, and psychological realities, the one sitting in 'other' does not seek to diminish his point of view and is not interested in finding the flaws in his position. There's no desire to correct him, quickly taking up a position of advice or support. The one truly sitting in 'other' is far too busy immersing herself in the teenager's experience. In other words, she tries to feel her way through his story and the nature of his experience. And if it is appropriate to give any advice then that would come later, after a 'real' understanding of the teenager's position has been achieved.

There are many who argue that this kind of empathy is merely an intellectual event that cannot really be attained, but this is quite a limited view. It can be achieved but it takes a willingness to suspend one's own sense of 'rightness' and also a commitment to practising an empathic way of being. We all have the capacity for benevolence, even altruism, but that level of generosity of spirit and charity is not without some sacrifice. The healthy position of other is not afraid of sacrifice; in fact, it lovingly embraces it. It realises that gifts of charity and service offer a dividend that is difficult to quantify... a deep sense of peace, contentment, and joy but this is not why these acts of kindness are undertaken. The one practising this healthy position gives without counting and the more he practises this worldview, the easier it is to view the world as others see it and he is also better able to see himself in the process... even his blind spot is illuminated. One is not able to understand all one needs to by being anchored only to one's own worldview. I, you, we cannot see everything we need to from 'self' alone. The position of other enables us all to find a generosity that introduces us even to those things we hide away in ourselves because there is not sufficient charity to embrace them. When we see the world through the eyes of others, we can see many of those things that otherwise simply pass us by. This position of consciousness has great virtue, and we really need to spend some time here every day to discover the best of ourselves.

Disadvantages

When we are trapped in the position of other in a way that's unhealthy, we make a virtue out of martyrdom and victimhood. We think our acts of kindness and generosity are gifts that empower and enable others along their path, and we're baffled when they don't do just that. Even worse, we're dismayed when they are not appreciated. Those with this tendency, rather than learning from their experience and seeing that their acts of kindness and compassion are not working, try even harder! As a consequence, their acts of charity, help and support can become the building blocks for their own demise and in some cases the demise of others. This position is often mistaken as simply a position of kindness and goodwill but in fact it can also be where the individual has become wedded to the idea that good deeds, without taking context into account, will always have positive outcomes. This is not always the case (see Virtues Always Travel in Pairs).

Good intention has to be our starting point, but we also need discrimination. We have to apply our efforts in a way that promotes benefit rather than supports entrapment and keeps us tied to the familiar. If our kindness merely serves to keep another enslaved by their own weaknesses, is this beneficial? The problem with the position of 'unhealthy other' is that it becomes blind to what's really helpful. It's not able to make sense of the feedback it receives from a situation or a particular course of action because it's so attached to doing what it 'believes' is the 'right' thing. Unfortunately, it doesn't see that the map of consequences is clearly saying that a new direction is needed and so the position of good intention alone is no longer part of the solution; it has in fact become part of the problem!

Empathy allows us to be more than we might be. It's a doorway to incredible insights, clarity, sensitivity and understanding but when it has lost its balance it becomes so embroiled in the other person's reality that it can no longer see whether it's being helpful or not. Furthermore, it has so lost sight of itself that its actions are now self-harming too. Those trapped in this position are generally well meaning but they inadvertently do more harm than good because both parties are weakened.

Summary

Hopefully this brief summary of the advantages and disadvantages of 'other' will encourage you to be more empathic in your dealings with others. It will also inspire you to look at the world through the eyes of another and not be trapped in the ego of thinking your worldview tells the whole story, because it doesn't. Those of us who dare to 'really' listen to the experience of the other are not only able to be of benefit, we're also able to access those experiences in ourselves that make us more complete. This overview will hopefully also encourage you to be aware of that dangerous position where empathy and compassion become blind to what is really needed; a position swept along by habit, circumstances and events, devoid of any real awareness and discrimination. This is such a damaging place because it condemns the self to terrible neglect and disrespect and in addition it often weakens the resolve and the independence of those it seeks to help. Sometimes the greatest act of charity and love is to stand back and to allow another to learn from their own experience. We are not always best qualified to help someone find their way. The position of 'other' is not all-knowing and we do best to remember that.