

## Seeing People as Trees

*When you go into the woods and look at trees, you see all these different trees. And some of them are straight, and some of them are evergreens, and some of them are whatever. And you look at the tree, and you allow it. You see why it is the way it is. You sort of understand that it didn't get enough light, and so it turned that way, and you don't get all emotional about it. You just allow it. You appreciate the tree.*

*The minute you get near humans, you lose all that. And you're constantly saying: You are too this, or I'm too that. That judging mind comes in. And so I practice turning people into trees. Which means appreciating them just the way they are.*

Ram Dass

I absolutely love the month of April because it is during this month that most of the trees in our neighbourhood either burst into blossom or produce new leaves that – for a short while only - are an incredibly uplifting shade of spring green.

I don't know about you, but I love all kinds of trees, small ones, big ones, young ones, old ones, even fallen ones. I never look at an old tree and think to myself, 'Oh that poor tree it is so old and bent out of shape!' But if I see an elderly human being in the street who is bent over and struggling to walk, I tend to pity them rather than to admire their beautiful essence.

So this month, I thought I would share with you two key ways in which we judge human beings, including ourselves, so much more harshly than trees. We will then explore how to rise above our judgemental mind so that we can begin to appreciate human beings of all shapes and sizes, including - please note well - ourselves.

First, it can be helpful to note the two key ways in which we keep comparing ourselves to other human beings. We all tend to feel either superior to others or inferior to them. Some individuals develop an arrogant or even narcissistic egoic identity. They then constantly remind themselves how much more successful, attractive, or virtuous they are compared to the common herd. They constantly try to boost their own self-esteem at the expense of others whom they may even treat with contempt.

Even the most spiritual or virtuous of us can develop a rather condescending attitude toward individuals whose primary goal in life is worldly success of some kind. I think it is probably just built into human nature to try and attain a feeling of safety through superiority, but this kind of self-esteem is so fragile and so easily punctured. You feel so superior to others because you have always had a slim waist and then one day a dear friend asks if you have gained a little weight and you instantly feel completely deflated.

Egoic pride can be a wonderful temporary fix for all our deeper, often subconscious feelings of inadequacy, shame and guilt. But this fix never truly puts us back together again. It just papers over the cracks of our fragile sense of self.

The second key way that we all constantly compare ourselves to others is by judging ourselves harshly as we compare ourselves to our peers. When we do this, we tend to assume that everyone else is more successful, more attractive, more virtuous, more together etc. etc. etc. than we are.

For example, I know a couple who are both doctors earning loads of money who think they are not at all well off because their neighbours send their children to elite private schools and go skiing several times a year, whilst they struggle financially to keep up with this exceptionally elite and luxurious way of life. Their 'inferiority complex' makes them pretty resentful, stressed and unhappy a lot of the time despite all their many blessings in life, including a joint income that most of us can only dream about.

So once we begin to notice how much we have a superiority or inferiority complex, what can we do about it?

Well, first of all, we need to understand that we are far more intertwined with others than we usually realise. We have not evolved in isolation. Our character and all our personal strengths and talents have been forged through our interactions with all those around us, especially our parents and early caregivers.

For example, sometimes when I am watching Richard Osman's House of Games, I can start to feel so superior to contestants who have virtually no historical knowledge. One contestant even guessed that England's Tudor Queen, Elizabeth 1 died in 1901 (for God's sake!) But if I am wise, I will take a quick break when I notice my ego puffing up like this to acknowledge my wonderful history teacher Miss Jones and one or two brilliant university professors who instilled in me a real love of history. Doing this, helps me to go from being egoically arrogant to being humble and grateful in a really short space of time.

Alternatively, when I am judging someone as far inferior to me because of their ignorant or even dangerous behaviour, I can simply pause and remind myself that I am blessed enough not to have had to walk anywhere in their shoes. So many adults who behave cruelly for example, turn out to have been cruelly treated in their childhood, including Hitler and Stalin. Just like a tree that is not nurtured by rich soil as a sapling, a child who is not nurtured by human love can easily grow up to be stunted or even crooked.

When I remember this fact, my tut-tutting about others' bad behaviour can quite quickly turn to genuine compassion for even the most violent of criminals. I also find it so helpful to remind myself from time to time that my worst 'enemies' just like me long to avoid suffering and to find lasting happiness in life.

So there we have it. The egoic thought system loves to persuade us that we are either superior or inferior to others because these two neurotic complexes reinforce our fake identity as totally separate beings. However, if we keep practising letting go of all these neurotic comparisons, we will more and more enjoy being an integral part of a whole forest of wonderfully diverse human beings who are all reaching up together for more light, even if the majority of them are not doing so consciously.

So this month, please keep letting go of all your egoic judgements and all your neurotic comparisons with other human beings so that you can leave more and more space deep within you for the light to pour in and illuminate your essence, which is as beautiful as the most stunning tree you could ever imagine.

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April 2025