

The Benefits of ‘Wise Selfishness’

We’re all a little self-serving. Here’s how to make that impulse work for you.



Credit...Geoff McFetridge

By Dan Harris

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Selfishness gets a bad rap — which, for the most part, is richly deserved. Nobody likes people who hog the ball or bogart the joint, perhaps because we see in those people a reflection of our own lurking capacity for greed. We say we care about others, but as the comedian George Carlin used to joke, we still take the bread from the middle of the loaf.

Aside from avoiding hypocrisy and public relations issues, there are many other reasons not to be selfish. Research [suggests](#) that compassionate, generous people are happier, healthier, more popular and more successful.

And yet, we all need to have some self-interest. If we lived in a state of perpetual altruistic concern, refusing to speak up for ourselves and generally being doormats, that would constitute what one Tibetan Buddhist teacher called “idiot compassion.”

So how do we strike a balance?

I recently flew to Dharamsala, India, to spend a few weeks in the orbit of His Holiness the Dalai Lama. This was a rare opportunity, given that he is now 87 years old and doesn’t grant interviews very often.

I am a huge fan of the Dalai Lama, which is perhaps unsurprising given that I write books and host a podcast about happiness. But I admit that I have a somewhat conflicted relationship with the man. On one hand, his biography is extraordinary. He was identified at age 2 as the spiritual and political leader of Tibet, and rapidly proved himself to be a meditative and academic adept. At 23, he was forced into exile after a Chinese invasion. Instead of fading into irrelevance, he became a global figure, meeting with world leaders, appearing in Apple ads and keeping the Tibetan cause in the headlines. And he did all of this while unflinchingly preaching compassion, even as the Chinese government repressed his people and desecrated their culture. He also used his influence and resources to help [catalyze](#) an explosion of scientific research into meditation.

On the other hand, I find that his unstinting advocacy for kindness and generosity provokes a kind of impostor syndrome for me. The Dalai Lama is considered an emanation of a Buddhist deity of compassion called Avalokiteshvara. This deity has a thousand arms, and on each hand there is an eyeball, scanning the world for suffering. In my low moments, I sometimes feel like I'm a thousand-armed being as well, except my palm-based eyeballs are seeking only self-centered gratification.

So that was the psychic baggage I carried into my interview with the Dalai Lama. During our encounter, however, I was reminded that His Holiness had a theory that elegantly exposed the false binary between selfishness and selflessness. He called it “wise selfishness.” We all have an inborn penchant for self-interest. It is natural, and nothing to be ashamed of. But, he said, a truly enlightened self-interest also means recognizing that acting in generous and altruistic ways makes you happier than solely being out for yourself does.

The concept of wise selfishness shows that the line between self-interest and other-interest is porous. Adam Grant, an organizational psychologist with the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania, has an apt term for the blending of selfless and selfish: [otherish](#).

The Dalai Lama told me, “Thinking in a more compassionate way is the best way to fulfill your own interests.” He added that his own practice was to think about benefiting other people as much as possible. “The result? I get benefit!” he exclaimed, after which he stuck out his tongue at me and issued one of his trademark belly laughs.

Then, he got serious. “Altruism does not mean you completely forget your own interests — no!” he said, with a graceful yet dismissive flick of his wrist.

This was exactly what I needed to hear, given my penchant for self-criticism. Wise selfishness doesn’t mean I can’t pursue my own personal ambitions. Around 2,600 years ago, the Buddha himself spoke at length about what constituted a “right livelihood,” one that does not harm other beings, and this approach did not preclude material success; some of the Buddha’s most loyal followers were wealthy merchants.

The important thing for wisely ambitious people to remember is that other-oriented states such as altruism and compassion — which you can think of as simply our innate capacity to care — pull you out of the exhausting loops of self-involvement into which we are so often thrust by modern society, with its emphasis on individualism, consumerism and the frantic aggregation of likes for selfies.

Modern psychological research supports the Dalai Lama’s insight. In his book, “Give and Take,” Mr. Grant writes that, in a professional context, people who are generous with their time but who also keep their own interests in mind are often the most successful people at an organization. This is in part because generosity makes you more well-liked by your co-workers, and in part because it makes you happier and more energetic. It’s a virtuous spiral: Being kind to others makes you happier, which makes you nicer, which makes you even happier.

So if you want to do selfishness better, work to cultivate a compassionate mind-set. [Research](#) suggests that capacities such as compassion and altruism are not unalterable factory settings, but skills to develop. Here are four strategies for accessing this upward spiral yourself.

Try loving-kindness meditation

Sit quietly, close your eyes and call to mind a succession of people. Start with someone who’s easy to love, like a pet or a child. As soon as you have a mental image of that person, silently send four kind thoughts their way: *May you be happy; may you be safe; may you be healthy; may you live with ease.* Then move on to yourself, a mentor, a neutral person, a difficult person and then all beings everywhere. Research on this practice is still emerging, but studies have shown that loving-kindness meditation can increase feelings of [social connectedness](#) and decrease [depression](#). This is

classic wise selfishness: You cultivate the capacity to care, and you get healthier and happier in the process. I suggest you start small, with one to five minutes a few days a week, and build from there.

I initially resisted this kind of meditation because, in addition to being selfish, I am also a skeptic and anti-sentimentalist. But once I incorporated it into my practice, it helped me ease up on myself. Warmth and compassion are omnidirectional. You can't leave yourself out.

Over time, as I've practiced sending loving-kindness to myself, I have realized that my selfishness is motivated by fear. In the old days, I used to revert to self-laceration every time I, say, tuned out of a conversation because I was compulsively checking where my show sat in the podcast rankings. Now, I can sometimes see this kind of reflexive selfishness as a natural, if unskillful, impulse. It's the organism trying to protect itself, but I don't have to automatically obey it. Having a friendlier attitude toward myself has, in turn, helped me be less judgmental of other people, which has improved my relationships, which makes me happier.

Talk to other people

Focus on increasing the number of positive interactions you have throughout the day, including with strangers at coffee shops and in elevators. Studies have shown that these “micromoments” are a powerful driver of [happiness](#). This practice is a powerful corrective to the lack of social connection that so many of us experience.

Even before the coronavirus pandemic, loneliness was on the rise. We know from psychological [research](#) that the strength of our relationships is perhaps the most important variable when it comes to human flourishing.

Dedicate your everyday tasks to other people

Before starting any activity, take a second to dedicate whatever you're about to do to the benefit of all beings. Seriously. Before you brush your teeth, take a nap or eat a sandwich, silently say to yourself something like: *I'm doing this so I can be strong and healthy — not just for myself, but so that I can be helpful to other people.* As with loving-kindness meditation, I found this a bit treacly at first, but now I see it as a useful way to elevate my quotidian activities and activate my latent altruism. So, before I exercise or meditate,

I try to remind myself that I'm doing it not only for selfish reasons, but also so I can be a healthier, happier and more helpful dad, husband and co-worker. Crucially, it is OK to begin this, and all of the other practices I've listed here, with selfish intent. It's likely that your motivation will start to shift over time.

Take advantage of small opportunities for generosity

Science tells us that being generous benefits both the recipient and the giver. FMRI scans [show](#) that being generous activates the same parts of the brain as dessert. It's called the "[helper's high](#)." And the gesture doesn't have to be grand. You don't have to rush into a burning building. It can be as simple as holding the door open for someone, giving a compliment or texting someone who is having a hard time.

Change can be a slow process. Our conditioning toward individualism and materialism runs deep, which is why it was useful for me to sit with the Dalai Lama and be reminded of wise selfishness. I've been working on these skills for years, and I still forget and lapse into grabbiness and then subsequent rounds of self-criticism. But over time, I've learned to turn the dial toward altruism.

One example is this article you're reading. Sure, part of me is motivated by a desire to promote my work and have my mother see me in The New York Times. But another part of me is motivated to share this information because I know from research and personal experience that it is likely to improve your life. I have come to see that there's nothing wrong with deriving pleasure from selfish gratification, especially when it fuels other-oriented work. Why can't selfishness and selflessness exist in a beneficial double helix?

Perfection is not on offer. Some days, your Avalokiteshvara arm may have bursitis. Instead of measuring ourselves against the Dalai Lama, we can use him as a useful polestar — a reminder that we can all train our minds to make marginal but meaningful strides. Even people like me who fear they're irreparably black-hearted. And even you.

Dan Harris is host of the Ten Percent Happier podcast.