

ASK THE TEACHERS

How can practitioners “take on the suffering of the world” or practice “for the sake of all beings” without also inflating their own sense of self-importance? As profound as these practices are, they also seem like fodder for the ego.



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REBECCA LI: As an antidote to the pernicious arrogance that gives rise to thoughts like “I’m doing something so selfless—aren’t I great?” we can practice gratitude for the opportunity to serve. In particular, we can be grateful for all of the causes and conditions that have made it possible for us to practice and to help other beings through our practice. Such causes and conditions might include the fact that our health, family, and financial situations are not so desperate that we cannot think of anyone else, or perhaps that had the opportunity to study with good teachers who inspire us to practice for the sake of all beings. We can also recognize the direct and indirect supports we continually receive from countless others who make our study and practice possible. In this way, we realize that we practice for the sake of all beings not because we are inherently better than others but because we have been the beneficiaries of all that has come together to make it possible for us to practice in this way. Practicing for all beings is one way we can repay those who love and support us.

Furthermore, we can practice gratitude for the opportunity to serve. Our desire to help does not obligate anyone else to accept that help. Without the willingness of others to open their hearts to receive us, we would not be able to offer of ourselves. We should also remember that, regardless of whether or

not we are successful, our attempts to alleviate others’ suffering also alleviates our own suffering. When we turn our focus toward all beings, we cease in that moment from obsessing over our own difficulties. Instead of believing we are such great people for helping others, we can thank all beings for allowing us to be of service. By cultivating this attitude, we are less likely to succumb to ego-feeding self-importance.

It is gratifying to see someone’s suffering lessened through our efforts. The good feelings that result are encouraging and inspiring and can be useful for sustaining our practice on the path. If we maintain clear awareness of what arises in our minds from moment to moment, with patience and diligence, we can perceive the subtle shift that occurs when these good feelings start to turn into an inflated sense of pride in our own generosity. In such moments, if we can remember to be grateful, this sense of self-aggrandizement will dissolve on its own. This requires diligence. Just because thoughts of self-importance did not arise in the last moment does not mean we no longer need to be vigilant in this moment, or the next.