

# Sticks and Stones: The Freedom of Not Taking Things Personally

## *A Journey from Ego-Reactivity to Spiritual Mastery*

By Dan Ofstedal – August 8, 2025 <sup>1</sup>

“So often times it happens that we live our lives in chains / And we never even know we have the key”  
—The Eagles, “Already Gone”

### **Introduction**

"Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me." This familiar childhood rhyme contains a profound truth that most adults have forgotten. And how many people do we know who really believe this? How many people do we know who *really live this way*—who are psychologically immune from the words and actions of others?

In reality, most people do just the opposite—take everything personally. The ego can trick us into believing that it's all about us. If someone says, "the dinner you made tasted bad," the cook is likely to take it personally and become upset. In actuality, the “insult” is all about the speaker and has *nothing* to do with the cook. This simple wisdom, both as a psychological tool and as a spiritual insight, points to one of the most liberating truths one can discover: the words and actions of others has everything to do with them and nothing to do with you. And the deep spiritual insight is this: the self that can take things personally is *not our true self*.

### **The Psychology of Personal Offense**

From a psychological perspective, taking things personally is a fundamental misunderstanding of how human perception works. It is, in fact, all about us in the sense that people perceive everything around them through their filters—each person creates their own story. But others are running on their own programs, creating their own story, and speaking and acting based on those programs, conditioning, and scripts. Their actions and words are not about the recipient at all.

Modern psychology has extensively documented this phenomenon. Cognitive behavioral therapy, for instance, recognizes that our emotional responses are not directly caused by external events, but by our *interpretation* of those events. When someone criticizes another person's cooking, the hurt feelings don't come from their words themselves, but from the meaning assigned to those words—perhaps that one is inadequate, unloved, or a failure as a caregiver.

The psychological mechanism behind taking things personally often stems from what therapists call "personalization"—a cognitive distortion where individuals assume responsibility for events outside their control or interpret neutral events as having personal significance. This tendency is deeply rooted in evolutionary history, where social rejection could mean literal death, making humans hyper-vigilant to perceived threats to their social standing.

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Yet this same psychological understanding offers the key to freedom. If one recognizes that interpretations create suffering, it becomes possible to question those interpretations. One can ask: "Is this really about me, or is this about the other person's inner world, their conditioning, their struggles, their limited perspective?" When people understand that everyone is operating from their own mental models and emotional states, they begin to see that others' behavior toward them is more a reflection of those others' internal landscape than an accurate assessment of their worth.

### **The Spiritual Dimension: Discovering Our True Self**

A deep understanding of this truth, coupled with a deep understanding of one's true nature, helps gain freedom from taking things personally. This spiritual insight reveals the deeper reason: the self that feels offended is not the true self. Whether understood as a child of God, one with the universe, or the aware presence, the true self transcends personal offense.

Jesus taught this principle repeatedly, though often in different language. When He said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34), He was demonstrating the ultimate expression of not taking things personally—even while being crucified. He recognized that His persecutors were acting from ignorance, from their limited understanding, not from any true knowledge of His divine nature.

Jesus also taught, "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven" (Matthew 5:11-12). This teaching suggests that true identity is not threatened by the opinions or actions of others. When one knows oneself as One with God, as a being of inherent worth and divine nature, the judgments of others lose their power to wound.

The Apostle Paul echoed this understanding when he wrote, "I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court; indeed, I do not even judge myself. My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me" (1 Corinthians 4:3-4). Paul had discovered that his true identity was not subject to human opinion—he was accountable ultimately to the divine, not to the shifting judgments of people.

### **Wisdom from Other Spiritual Traditions**

This insight transcends Christianity and appears across spiritual traditions. In Buddhism, the concept of "anatta" or non-self teaches that the ego-self that takes offense is ultimately an illusion. The Buddha taught that suffering arises from attachment to a false sense of self. When we realize that there is no fixed, permanent self to be insulted, the very foundation of taking things personally dissolves.

The Stoic philosopher Epictetus, himself a former slave who understood powerlessness, taught: "We are disturbed not by what happens to us, but by our thoughts about what happens." He distinguished between what is "up to us" (our thoughts, judgments, and responses) and what is "not up to us" (other people's actions and opinions). This distinction is fundamental to not taking things personally—recognizing that others' behavior belongs to their sphere of control, not one's own.

In Hinduism, the concept of the "witness consciousness" or "sakshi bhava" points to our true nature as pure awareness, untouched by the drama of personality and ego. From this perspective, taking things

personally is like a movie screen being upset by the images projected upon it—a fundamental confusion of our nature. In this metaphor, we are the screen, not the movie.

The Sufi poet Rumi wrote, "Try not to resist the changes that come your way. Instead, let life live through you. And do not worry that your life is turning upside down. How do you know that the side you are used to is better than the one to come?" This points to a trust in life's unfolding that makes personal offense impossible—when we surrender to the larger intelligence of existence, we stop needing to defend a small sense of self.

### **The Four Agreements and Cultural Conditioning**

Don Miguel Ruiz's book "The Four Agreements" articulates this wisdom clearly, with its second agreement, "Don't take anything personally." The other three "agreements" discussed in the book—be impeccable with your word, don't make assumptions, and always do your best—are much more consistent with common societal teachings. In contrast, the Second Agreement is *diametrically opposed* to common behavior.

The culture actually *trains people to take things personally*. Society teaches that one should care what others think, that reputation matters, that people need to defend themselves against criticism. Social media has amplified this tendency exponentially, creating platforms where personal offense and outrage drive engagement and profit. People are rewarded for taking things personally with attention, sympathy, and the illusion of righteousness.

Yet Ruiz points out that taking things personally is *actually a form of selfishness*—it assumes that everything others do is about oneself, when in reality, everyone is dealing with their own internal struggles, conditioning, and limited perspectives. When someone is rude, they're not responding to the recipient's true nature; they're responding to their own pain, fear, or confusion.

### **The Practice of Non-Personal Response**

Learning not to take things personally is both simple and challenging. It's simple because it requires only a shift in perspective—recognizing that others' behavior reflects their inner state, not one's worth. It's challenging because it goes against deep conditioning and requires remaining centered in one's true identity rather than in the ego-self.

This practice becomes easier when one cultivates what spiritual teachers call "witness consciousness"—the ability to observe thoughts and reactions without being completely identified with them. When someone offers criticism, instead of immediately feeling hurt, one can pause and ask: "What is this person really saying about their own state of mind? What pain or limitation is expressing itself through their words?"

This doesn't mean becoming passive or allowing oneself to be mistreated. Rather, it means responding from wisdom rather than reactivity. One can set boundaries, communicate clearly, and provide self-protection when necessary—but from a place of centeredness rather than from wounded ego.

## **Conclusion: The Freedom of Spiritual Maturity**

The ultimate freedom comes from understanding that the true self—whether called the child of God, Buddha nature, pure consciousness, or simply essential being—cannot be diminished by others' opinions or actions. This self exists beyond the realm of human judgment and social approval. It is connected to something vast and unchanging.

When one knows oneself from this deeper place, taking things personally naturally stops, not as a discipline or technique, but as a spontaneous expression of true nature. The recognition emerges that everyone is doing their best from their current level of consciousness, even when that best falls far short of love and wisdom.

This recognition transforms not only personal experience but relationships with others. When one stops taking things personally, greater compassion, patience, and genuine helpfulness become possible. Others' behavior can be seen as information about their inner state rather than as attacks on one's worth. This shift creates space for authentic connection and mutual understanding.

The ancient playground rhyme was right: words truly cannot hurt—at least, they cannot hurt the true self. The bones may break, but the divine Self remains whole. In discovering this truth, one finds not only psychological freedom but spiritual liberation—the recognition that each person is much more than the small self that seeks approval and fears rejection. Our true selves—Oneness—can never be hurt.

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