

Liberation from Ignorance of Ego-denial



A half truth is a whole lie.

—Yiddish Proverb

The term 'ego', despite being one of the most used and abused terms in spirituality, remains to be one of the least understood. Many teachers criticize ego, labeling it as one thing or another. But they do so without even having a basic understanding of what ego actually is.

A recent example of the indiscriminate use of the term ego, and the confusion that surrounds it, is Andrew Cohen's decision to take a sabbatical from teaching when confronted by his older students with the fact that he 'still has ego'.¹ On the surface, it appears to be a noble gesture, showing that he was humble enough to give up teaching upon acknowledging this fact. But the first question that arises is: How did he not know this before? And the second question is: Is it really a valid reason to give up teaching?

Had he had the correct vision of the path and evolution, he would have realized that his problem is not 'having an ego', but rather having a limited realization of his true self. Without ego, not only

¹ In a public apology Cohen said: "Enlightenment has always been and always will be about transcending the ego. Over the last several years, some of my closest students have tried to make it apparent to me that in spite of the depth of my awakening, my ego is still alive and well."



could he not be a spiritual teacher – he could not be human at all. Unless we clearly understand the principle of the co-existence of ego with our pure nature, and what impact self-realization has upon our human consciousness, we cannot hope to progress in our spiritual evolution. If our initial concept of enlightenment is ignorant, in time our path will only yield more and more ignorance.

Of course, one could say that when Cohen and his students spoke about ‘having an ego’, what they were referring to was not ‘the construct of the personal self’, but rather the qualities of being self-centered or arrogant, as the word can be used in both senses. Either way, ego is being demonized as the embodiment of all our problems. It is this kind of ignorance that stands at the root of this distorted concept of ego and all the confusion that follows from it.

Two False Perceptions of Ego

There are two main spiritual viewpoints regarding ego. The first one attempts to transform the ego to the extent that one is capable of unlimited self-sacrifice, is perfectly moral, and attains the equivalent of sainthood. The second is intent on either totally annihilating ego or realizing that it is non-existent by nature. Both of these views are entirely unbalanced and completely off the mark. The ego is not meant to be perfect, for its nature is relative, but it is certainly significant and real enough to be an essential component of anyone’s healthy consciousness.

Some more simplistic teachings assert that the ego’s identification with the body is an example of its ignorance. But how can we exist without having a basic and healthy identification with the body? Without our physical point of reference in the manifested world, we would die. It is quite absurd to challenge this basic common sense. Our thinking and emotional processes are also the natural extensions of the fundamental ego-identification with our personal human existence. All of these functions have been designed according to the creator’s intelligence for the positive purpose of living and evolving on both human and spiritual levels. The ego is actually an expression of our higher self, and prior to our spiritual actualization, it is what enables us to enter the path to our soul. So, what is ego really?

Correct Definition of Ego



Ego is an intrinsic sense of me that is bonded with our psychosomatic (body-mind) existence. Without this bond, we would not be able to exist. Any teaching that says identification with the so-called body-mind organism being the cause of ignorance is both unintelligent and unrealistic. Disputing the inherently positive role of this identification amounts to spiritual madness.

From the viewpoint of consciousness, ego is another name for the observer, which is the sense of me that is linked to and identified with external attention. External attention flows outward to facilitate our perception of both the outer world and the mind. The observer is evolving and as it evolves, so does ego. While it is initially entirely subconscious, meaning it has no sense of its own subjectivity, it gradually develops the capacity for self-reference and self-consciousness. Finally, it becomes able to meet itself directly and cross the boundary into conscious me. Conscious me is what we call 'pure subjectivity' – it knows itself directly, without needing to refer to itself through the world of self-reference and objectivity.

The idea that animals do not have an ego is incorrect. It is a naive view that comes from the common belief that ego is the exclusive territory of a human's psychosomatic existence. Even though an animal's subconscious observer is less sophisticated, it nevertheless displays all of the rudimentary characteristics of ego in their more basic levels of development. When a cat wants to catch a mouse, it is very conscious of the environment, the mouse, and its own desire to eat the mouse, which results in frustration when he fails to catch it. Its ego actually has to be quite developed to display all of these functions at once. How different is it from the average human, who is infatuated with pursuing his own desires and goals?

The presence of ego is the very prerequisite for being conscious. In its higher levels of development, it enables us to become self-conscious as well. It should be clear that without the ability to be self-conscious, it is impossible for us to awaken both conscious me and pure consciousness. Consciousness needs the polarity of something other than me to awaken its pure subjectivity. Through its relationship with the world and with other people, ego is able to create an image of itself; the objective reality serves as a mirror through which it can become aware of its own existence.

There are three main stages to the process of formulating an awareness of oneself: self-reference, self-consciousness, and self-image. These stages take us beyond the purely subconscious sense of me. Self-reference represents the basic primal mechanism of becoming conscious of oneself through one's thoughts or inner dialogue. Self-consciousness is a further development of self-reference,



where we become conscious of ourselves as a personality. For instance, feeling shy or proud are forms of self-consciousness. Finally, self-image is the ability to formulate a concrete concept of who we think we are, including how others perceive us. For instance, it is when we conceptualize our feeling of shyness as 'I am a shy person'. These three levels of development are fully interconnected, and the line between them is not always clear; one can be in a psychological mode that is in-between self-reference and self-consciousness, or self-consciousness and self-image.

While the observer can be regarded as the headquarters of ego in the mind, ego is more than just our sense of identity behind external attention. Ego is also directly linked to our emotional existence, and to our inherent search for security and happiness on the human level. Through ego, we discriminate between positive and negative experiences, avoid pain and being hurt, and seek emotional nourishment and pleasure. Ego is not restricted to the mind, and when we are more evolved, it also becomes linked to our higher feelings and to the wisdom of the soul. In short, no one can exist without their ego, for ego is the hub of our personal reality; without it, our mind could not exist. The question as to whether the ego is good or bad can only arise from an incorrect perception of what it is. It is much more important to understand the basic principles of ego development and how it is linked to our higher identity.

Ego as a Shadow

While ego is positive in essence, it invariably develops a negative and destructive side, a shadow which needs to be purified and aligned with the soul as we evolve into her. Prior to the soul's awakening, the ego can be regarded as its unconscious expression, or substitute, in the dimension of me. Because it is living in a way that is disconnected from the soul, there is a danger that it will succumb to its lower, negative tendencies. Unfortunately, this 'negative' type of ego is not only often present in humanity in general, but also in some spiritual seekers. The ego becomes increasingly corrupt when it consistently indulges in its arrogant, anti-life, darker side. In extreme cases, it can cross the line between good and evil and reach a point of being virtually beyond repair. When this happens, it is only by going through excruciating despair and pain that the ego's arrogance can be broken down and re-opened to humility and love, redeeming what would otherwise be a lost soul.



Healing and Purification of Ego

The negativity inherent to ego is one of the reasons why it has been identified as the cause of our suffering. But ego has to be educated and transformed, rather than condemned. Part of that transformation is a natural outcome of our expansion into our pure nature and the awakening of our soul; the presence of the soul alone has a deep impact on how we experience our sense of self on the level of ego. However, ego still needs to be consciously aligned, integrated, and surrendered into the soul in order to be transformed completely. Ego itself has to agree to surrender and give up its central position in our existence so that it can be merged with our higher self.

The construct of ego has its roots in our subconscious mind. Therefore, unless that subconscious is transformed, our ego is bound to remain in a disharmonious and disturbing relationship with our pure nature. The transformation of the subconscious mind is directly tied to the processes of healing and purification, which can only begin when our personality begins to surrender to its higher self. Healing and purification are directly connected, as the negative ego has both emotional and mental roots of manifestations. When our personality is hurt, it creates various forms of negativity, such as unjustified anger, hate, resentment, jealousy, self-pity, arrogance, and insincerity. All these emotions and lower tendencies are fundamentally an expression of an immature relationship with our pain and a refusal to take responsibility for our own transformation.

Many seekers imagine that they experience healing through various forms of therapy or release, but this is a misunderstanding of what healing truly is. For instance, there is a widely held belief that we need to re-experience our deepest wounds in order to release them. However, more often than not, this poking around in the past results in opening our wounds even more. In the absence of the soul, the attempt to heal is likely to exaggerate our identification with the self-pitying personality and reinforces it all over again. Personality is always hurt, and it will keep getting more and more hurt as long as it is disconnected from truth. One who works on himself while remaining fully identified with his personality cannot really get in touch with his true pain, and as such, will fall into the trap of self-pity, recreating imaginary pains and blaming himself and others.

There is a positive place for therapy, but for it to be effective, it must be supported by the process of meditation and awakening; therapy must begin to happen from the soul. To begin healing in a real way, we must first of all take responsibly and create a positive relationship with our pain, so



that it can become the very vehicle of our transformation. Then, the ego has to consciously choose to submit itself to the soul. Ego has to activate its higher intention, which is in fact the intention of our soul. By serving its higher intention and resisting its lower tendencies, ego ceases to inflict more layers of pain upon itself, and in time, becomes purified. As long as ego is in the center of our identity, this simply cannot happen, because it is too locked in its own limited presence and the construct of personality to allow any light to penetrate the many layers of its subconscious. For ego to transform, the space of surrender to our higher being must be open, at least to some extent. True healing releases us from the very knot of identification with the false self, so that our identity can be freely transferred into the soul.

A purified ego should not be confused with egolessness or moral perfection. Complete purity, or 'sainthood', are idealistic concepts created by the linear mind that are often used as forms of religious manipulation. A healed and purified ego is not at odds with natural laws and principles of our human existence, which is bound to the dimension of imperfection. Such an ego does not refuse to experience and embrace a certain level of negativity, which can naturally manifest as a response to the need for self-preservation in the conflicting environments of this world. However, such relative negativity (for instance, justified anger) is no longer self-generated, but rather arises from the place of wisdom and the soul. When ego reaches psychological transparency and integrity, it serves as a pure vehicle and open window for the soul to express herself in the world.

Ego: An Essential Aspect of the Soul

While the soul is our divine individuality, our pure nature beyond the psychological self, the ego represents the sense of self which is linked to the faculty of self-reference in the world of duality. Even though its main function is to create coherency within our personality, within the structure of our identity based on thoughts, emotions, and bodily existence, the ego's higher purpose is to serve as the soul's extension into individual human consciousness. Prior to the awakening of the soul, ego is developing its identity in separation from the soul, and it comes to be locked in the dream (or nightmare) of being our true and only identity – this is the false self. However, this falseness is not inherent to ego, rather is it a reflection of its low level of evolution and disconnection from the soul.



Even when ignorant, ego still has some intelligence. It is this intelligence that allows the average human to survive on the physical plane and to maintain an indispensable, albeit basic, level of integrity and sanity. And despite its ignorant subconscious condition, the ego is also capable of discernment, learning, and reaching relative transformation. If one's ego has not evolved sufficiently, one is not ready to enter the path. It is through the ego's transformation that one prepares the ground for spiritual awakening. For this reason, the negation and criticism of the ego in spiritual circles is not only counterproductive but destructive. Without the ego, there can neither be a path nor enlightenment.

The Positive Role of Self-Image

While a negative ego is usually associated with excessive attachment to self-image, there is also a constructive purpose to self-imagining. When we reach the level where there is self-love and an unconditional sense of self-worth, through being fulfilled through the radiance of our pure subjectivity, self-image no longer serves as a pale imitation for knowing who we are. Rather, it is a tool that gives us a perspective of our relative existence in the context of our relationship with the world and others, as well as bringing a second layer of recognition to – and verification of – our deeper, more evolved self. Self-image is a mentally and emotionally defined understanding of who we are reflected in the mirror of intelligence. Without the ability to create self-image, we would be both socially and spiritually handicapped.

Self-image has an important role to play on the path, including helping us to identify our spiritual attainments and shortcomings. For example, after establishing pure consciousness, we should be able to recognize that we have attained it. While it is important to strip our self-image from excessive psychological baggage, there is also a place for a positive emotional relationship with our image. There is nothing wrong with feeling good about oneself for having mastered the art of meditation or for having shifted to the absolute state. Even the ability to have a guilty conscience for being lazy on the path or for becoming entangled in one's lower tendencies can actually be constructive expressions of self-image. In this case, we create negative self-image based on our wisdom and discrimination. However, we must still take care to avoid creating unnecessary layers of negativity and guilt. Unintelligent use of self-image can be destructive and in conflict with the healthy principle of self-love and the evolution of the soul. It is better to use self-criticism



constructively, from a perspective of self-love, to activate our higher intention and modify our behavior.

The Ego and Self-love

The essence of a healthy ego is self-love. The ego's instinctive need for well-being and love, though often misguided and distorted, originates in its essence, from the soul.

Without self-love, the ego feels powerless and becomes overly dependent, compulsively seeking acceptance and affirmation from others. Through self-love, the ego establishes a higher relationship with its own existence. It becomes able to establish a proper balance between its essence as the soul and the external world. Even at an immature stage, when the soul is still dormant, an integrated ego can be connected to that self-love. How can an unawakened ego experience self-love in the absence of pure subjectivity? Although it is very limited, self-love can still be experienced at this stage. Here, it is as an indication of the maturity of our me's connection to itself, beyond the structure of our psychological self. Indeed, self-love on the level of ego is the prerequisite for our entry into the realm of the soul and I am.

Translucent Ego

The initial role of the ego is to serve in the awakening of the soul. However, once our pure subjectivity is fully embodied, the ego then needs to surrender to the soul so it can be fully integrated and merged with its higher self. The ego must go through a complex process of becoming increasingly infused into the soul until it reaches complete translucency. The translucent ego is a pure window for the soul, and her positive extension into creation through the vehicle of human consciousness and identity. Such an ego is still directly tied to our personal identity, with its natural need to be fulfilled on a human level, but it attends to its human needs based on the soul's wisdom and purpose – it belongs to our higher being now. It should be emphasized that the translucent ego of an awakened soul is fully normal and human; it is clear, efficient, capable of self-reference and self-reflection, and retains the ability to experience the whole spectrum of human emotions.



Role of a Teacher in Challenging Ego

There is a stereotypical model of the master-disciple relationship, wherein the spiritual master challenges his disciple's ego to the extent the latter is completely humiliated. When faced with this situation, the disciple either surrenders to the master (renounces his ego), rebels against this challenge (asserts his ego), or simply feels hurt at the seeming injustice (passively absorbs the criticism or humiliation).

Is such a challenge helpful for a student to transcend his ego, or is it an abuse of power? It depends on the situation. At times, it is the responsibility of a teacher to challenge the negative side of a student's ego, its unhealthy aspects and arrogant tendencies which cling excessively to self-image. However, the essence of the ego is positive and directly tied to the soul. If a teacher's challenge to his student is emotionally damaging, adding a further wound which will in turn need to be healed, it amounts to an abuse of power. When this happens, there is neither transformation nor transcendence of ego; it is not just the 'ego' that is hurt, but the soul.

Because of poor discernment in mainstream spirituality, any expression of the personal self is ignorantly labeled as 'ego', something to be either negated or transcended. This ignorant and false perception is the very origin of guilt and self-hatred, qualities which have infiltrated the majority of non-dual teachings. A true spiritual teacher must embrace his own ego before assuming the false agenda of 'destroying' the ego of his students. He is not qualified to challenge anyone else's ego unless he is able to discriminate between what is healthy and what is unhealthy about this aspect of our self. A teacher who abides on the assumption that ego is 'bad' needs to begin by challenging his own ego, the one that lives the lie of being ego-less.

Conclusion

It is time that we bring a higher level of intelligence and honesty into the science of spiritual illumination. The crusade against ego must stop, for it stems from an ancient fallacy that our personal existence is somehow in direct contradiction to our light, or even sinful. This self-denial and lack of respect for who we are is a form of darkness that has infiltrated spirituality. How can spirituality be a way of light if darkness is hidden inside it? It is significantly harmful when teachers



judge any positive manifestations of ego in themselves or in their students, ‘protecting’ themselves from aspects of themselves which ‘come from the ego’ as if it were a very bad thing. This type of behavior is both foolish and manipulative; it is to dishonestly follow a vision of enlightenment that can never be reached. The very principle of having honor, dignity, and faith in who one is as a human manifestation of the divine is directly linked to the faculty of a healthy ego. To go against it is foolish and ignorant, and it must stop. Accepting and embracing our ego-identity as an essential component of our multidimensional divine self is the foundation of true spiritual awakening.

Blessings,
Anadi

For a full glossary of terminology please visit our website www.anaditeaching.com/glossary