

Aligning Self-image with the Wisdom of the Soul



The ability to create a self-image is one of the key traits that distinguishes us as human beings. A person in whom this faculty was damaged or lost would be considered insane. He would have no idea who he is and be unable to function in normal society. A baby is unable to create a self-image, but neither has it developed psychologically or on the level of the observer in order to function in the world. Rudimentary forms of self-image can also be detected in more evolved animals. For example, as a result of negative self-image, a dog may hide in shame or fear from its owner after it has done something wrong. But these are very basic forms of self-image, and not as clearly defined in their minds as they are for humans.

Some spiritual traditions speak negatively about self-image. But they are confusing what is a natural and positive faculty with how it is being misused by an unevolved ego. Without self-image, we would be dysfunctional. The ability to form self-image is an integral aspect of our intelligence and of our ability to interact and manage in the manifested world. Self-image does not need to be eliminated, but rather aligned with the wisdom and purity of awakened subjectivity.

Various Levels of Self-image

Self-image can be experienced on several levels, from the very basic to the more complex. Its level is a direct reflection of the degree of our psychological evolution. For instance, even just to have a perspective of oneself relative to one's immediate surroundings, one must have a pre-conceived image of oneself as the subject of this experience. On this most fundamental level, self-image



indicates the basic duality between me and the world, and also largely defines the relationship between the two.

In spirituality, there is a naive idea that the mechanism through which we differentiate ourselves from the outer world is the root of ignorance and separation. And while it is indeed a root of separation, it is not the root of ignorance. Our separation from the world is not a mistake, but the beginning of the process of differentiating our true individuality from universal subconsciousness, and this primary sense of duality opens the space for our further evolution into self-awareness. Even though separation is meant to be transcended on some level, it is essentially positive, being the point from where our further evolution can begin. To eliminate the basic distinction between me and the world would render a person insane. If this is 'enlightenment', it is indeed better not to be enlightened. So we first recognize ourselves as different from the outer environment. In this way, we know that we are not the tree in front of us or the dog that we are patting.

After establishing our basic self-image, we gradually enrich it with more sophisticated forms of self-orientation and a higher level of detail. For instance, we are able to look at ourselves as if from outside, effectively creating a mental impression of who we are as a person. So first we know ourselves to be something other than the world outside, and then we begin to define ourselves more precisely: as a human, as male or female, as having a specific body type, as a member of a particular race or country, as being smart or slow in learning, as having particular talents and deficiencies, and so on.

This more sophisticated self-image is developed within the social context, the more we link our image to how other people perceive us. Indeed, a larger portion of self-image is socially conditioned, with both positive and negative consequences. On the positive side, being able to see ourselves through the eyes of others helps us have a more objective picture of who we are personality-wise, and ensures our behavior is appropriate for the society we are in. These aspects are important for our human development. However, the social conditioning of our self-image also has its downsides, because society does not care about the evolution of our higher individuality. Society's concept of an acceptable person is relatively superficial and stereotypical. Our efforts to develop a personality that conforms with a socially accepted self-image – such as the desperate yearning so many have just to be 'normal' – can enslave our spirit, lock us into a herd mentality, and block our evolution towards our true nature.



Different cultures and subcultures have various accepted norms and very diverse criteria for what constitutes a positive or negative self-image. For instance, many young people seek to look ‘cool’ in order to cultivate a positive self-image. According to their norms, being accepted by their peers may require wearing eccentric clothes, having tattoos and body piercings, and behaving in ways many others would consider bizarre. So a large part of the personality’s self-image is made up of the need to please others. We feel reassured when we have the approval of others because we define ourselves by the feedback we receive from society. This pattern of dependency originally developed from the need to survive in a herd; if we lived alone, our self-image would remain very rudimentary because we would not need to see how our image is reflected back in the eyes of others.

The self-image that serves survival and procreation can also be observed in the social structures of more evolved animals. A male wolf competing for a position of power in its pack projects an image of being stronger to the other wolves. On the other hand, a weak and cowardly wolf clearly knows that it has no chance of reaching a high level in the hierarchy in the pack, and limits its efforts to basic survival in the hope of not being rejected. Very similar behavior can be observed in humans, such as when young men get together in street gangs; they are much like a pack of wolves with human bodies, with the addition of immature emotions and a basic social conscience.

Self-image and Shame

The idea of shame has evolved from the need to please others in order to survive in a society. It is closely linked to morality, as well as to religion, which tends to exploit this aspect of self-image. When our behavior falls short of our moral expectations, we have been trained to create a negative or shameful self-image. There is a plus side to this mechanism because having a social moral code does help humans connect with their conscience. Some people do not have a conscience, and that means that not only are they not in touch with their humanity, but also that they have not absorbed the fundamental lessons of the social moral code. Morality is a double-edged sword: it teaches people to be good through social rules or religious principles, but because it does not connect them to the source of goodness, it results in them being enslaved by social conditioning based on fear and shame. Fear and shame are not only external, but have also become embodied internally, where they wreak further self-inflicted damage through reinforcing a negative self-image.



Another aspect of shame is linked to the concept of social honor. In Japan, there is a tradition of 'losing face', 'mentso wo ushinau', when one is condemned by society. From an outsider's perspective, it seems quite absurd, and yet this concept has, to a degree, dominated the Japanese interpretation of right and wrong. In their society, it is quite common to commit suicide after having 'lost face'. In this case, when one is condemned by social opinion, one is rejected by even the closest of family; a mother would reject a son because he had been rejected by society. When we see behavior like this from a distance, it may seem very strange to us. Why would someone care so much about what others think of him that it would cause him to take his own life? But the same underlying conditioning and dynamics are present in virtually all societies.

This example demonstrates the extraordinary power that negative self-image can have over those who do not know any better. What becomes apparent is that people often define and identify themselves entirely through their social context and have no real inner life of their own. They have become a helpless and vulnerable prisoner of self-image, which is actually no more than their understanding, or interpretation, of how they are seen by others. Sometimes how we interpret what others think of us is purely a projection of our own fears or perceptions. For instance, we may feel mortified when imagining how badly others think of us, while in reality they might not care at all or may even like us. In the opposite scenario, we may imagine that people love and admire us, while they really see us as boring or annoying. In the world of self-image, the boundary between imagination and reality is often blurred.

So, why would we become so dependent on what others think of us? It is good to have some perspective on how we are being seen by others, as this serves as a mirror for social self-awareness. But to base our entire self-worth on the opinions of others is foolish. Other people may praise us one day and despise us the next – there is no stability or security in how we are perceived by others or by the society we live in.

Politicians devote an enormous amount of time, expense, and effort to create and sustain a positive social image, because not only are they empty in a spiritual sense, but their power and livelihood depends on how well they manipulate how other people perceive them. Would any reasonably intelligent, self-respecting person wish such a fate upon themselves? One's true self-worth is not lost because people do not like us. We mistakenly give up our self-worth when we let ourselves become slaves to, and victims of, others' opinions, and of the superficial impressions they form of us without ever seeing our soul.



Transcending the Inner Judge

Freud created a concept of ‘super-ego’ to describe that part of our psyche which has absorbed the standards and values of our parents and society, and acts as something of a conscience or inner judge, curbing our more primal and instinctual impulses and urges. This inner judge is the relentless voice inside, constantly checking how we are doing and if we are good enough or not. Ideally, we should use our own discriminative intelligence to assess the quality of our life, who we are, and our actions. But, evidently, most people lack this rather basic intelligence. Instead, their well-being depends entirely upon their ability to maintain a self-image of being good enough in the eyes of others.

What is ‘good enough’ is never cut and dry, as it will vary according to whom we are with, and even vary from one day to the next with the same people. This means continuous checks are required to verify that we are still ‘okay’. So even if we feel we have successfully managed to project a positive self-image at any point in time, in the next moment we can be assailed by doubts, asking, “Am I still good enough?” Almost everyone lives within this ongoing internal conflict. Why do people depend so much on these inner judgments? It is because they are not in a loving relationship with their own self and they do not trust who they are. Without self-love, self-judgment always gets out of control, unless one chooses a life of numbed indifference or arrogance, which are both the unfeeling and unhappy cousins of self-denial.

Objective and Biased Self-image

Human beings have developed many strategies to manipulate the self-image they project. Some use excessive judgment and self-criticism to put themselves down. Others will beat themselves up and actually put effort into maintaining an inferiority complex. Their negative self-image means they are never in touch with their worthiness. They refuse to acknowledge their good qualities and obsessively wonder how well their super-ego is performing.

On the other side of the spectrum are those who blindly hold on to a positive self-image of themselves no matter how badly they behave. They fear the damage either self-criticism or criticism from others might do to the self-image that they have carefully nurtured as their defense



against the world at large. In the words of Friedrich Nietzsche, "The most common lie is that which one lies to himself; lying to others is relatively an exception."

It is essential that we should strive to have as objective a picture of ourselves as possible, and recognize clearly when we are trying to manipulate our self-image. For instance, we may act in ways which bolster our feelings of pride and self-righteousness. We not only use self-image to justify our thoughts, actions, and social status, but go to the extreme of making it an idol to be worshipped. We dare not question this idol because our self-worth is totally invested in it. However, our true spiritual core remains unawakened and unexplored, meaning we are essentially hollow inside. Our self-image is only a superficial, outer psychological creation, which we must constantly manipulate to compensate for our existential emptiness. The only way to go beyond this is to remove ourselves from the fragmented psychological mind, so that we can be free to deal with reality honestly, rather than live our life disguised within our contrived self-image.

Beyond Arrogance and False Humility

Two extremes of self-image are false humility and arrogance. For instance, if one sings very well but says to others, "I am only an average singer," this may be considered humility, but it is also not true. Such a person may claim this humility for different reasons: he may have a separate, secret inner self-image of being a good singer, but prefers to present a hypocritical image of humility to others; or despite being a good singer, he may have low esteem and an exterior self-image which mirrors this, thus failing to acknowledge his real value. Of course, if one is a poor or just average singer, there is nothing wrong with being honestly humble about it.

We are all familiar with people who exaggerate their importance, creating an arrogant self-image. This may be arrogance at both the inner and outer self-image levels: they may feel important and arrogant inside, but pretend humility externally; or they may make a show of being important and arrogant to others to compensate for a feeling of inferiority inside. There are many variations of the games that ego can play with itself and with other egos.

Some egos want an intellectual self-image. Others want a more physical one, such as that of a bodybuilder or martial artist. And yet others wish to appear to be spiritually evolved or even enlightened. The expressions of the egoic self-image are endless. They serve as a psychological



smoke screen, or mask, covering up an inner vacuum to try to help the ego feel better. When we can see this, it is both comic and tragic at the same time.

And yet we should not forget that in spite of it being contrived and misused, the ability to create a self-image is necessary and must also be valued and respected. It is an important aspect of our general self-consciousness, essential to the function of the reflective mind and the evolution of intelligence. However, in order to be able to use it in accordance with the principles of wisdom, we must unshackle it from all of the subconscious and psychological baggage it carries. For us to form an objective self-image that reflects our reality in a discerning and truthful way, we must stop being so emotionally and existentially identified with it. We must take a step back from that image and recognize where our true value and self-worth is.

Self-image and True Worthiness

As humans, we must know how to live in society and adapt to the rules and changes that may be required. While we might rebel against some of the rules, we must follow a number of them to continue to function in the society we are in. Wearing clothes reflects part of our self-image and is an example of a basic requirement in virtually all societies, plus there are rules for which types of clothes are acceptable depending on the environment and social setting. This also applies to a person of the path. In Taoism, the masters of old revealed the wisdom of ‘concealing our illumination’, of a sage blending into society so that he could remain inconspicuous.

A healthy self-image does not preclude having a sense of honest pride in oneself on a human level, including a positive feeling about aspects of our personal life. The key for this to be genuine and appropriate is when it is an honest reflection of our relative human self, rather than a false self-image we fabricate and depend on to compensate for empty or inferior feelings we hide inside.

Our self-image is not who we essentially are. Our existence is not an image; it is being. An image is just an external point of reference – important but relative. To make use of our self-image intelligently, we must know who we are beyond any image, and find our true worth in our unconditional, pre-psychological subjectivity. Only then will we stop being so desperately dependent on what others think of us and on what we think of ourselves. This is the beginning of freedom.



Being Open to Criticism

Because of an excessive identification with self-image, many people are not able to receive any criticism, even if that criticism is justified and lovingly meant. Despite having nothing to lose, they are closed-minded and will take offense at such well-intended advice.

If the criticism is mistaken and the person who voiced it cannot be convinced of their error, then that person should just be allowed to think whatever they want to. There is no reason for the person criticized to dwell on this or feel any further concern about it. What others think should not be taken as a threat or attack. If the other is voicing their criticism aggressively, then a stronger response may be called for. But even that should come from a place of relaxed inner detachment.

On the other hand, if one receives constructive criticism which is valid, this should be seen as an opportunity to learn from feedback from the external world and become more self-aware. An important part of our overall psychological purification and healing is working towards learning from and transcending extreme emotional reactions triggered by others' criticisms. Any exaggerated resistance to receiving criticism is a result of our fundamental insecurity over who we think and feel we are, and this must be resolved by attaining higher self-knowledge and identity, together with unconditional self-love.

This emotionally reactive phenomenon is very prevalent in the spiritual scene, where seekers are closed to criticism of their path. They feel their self-image – along with the image they have of their path – is threatened, and respond in an irrational way, refusing even to check if the criticism may be justified and well-intended or not. In these cases, the seeker's self-image fully identifies with their concept of the particular tradition they follow, creating an emotional bondage which effectively blocks them from being open to and finding objective truth and a higher perspective. Such reactive and defensive behavior is one facet of an ego-based, false self-image that obscures the path to the realization of our light.



Affecting the Self-image of Others

While it is common to base one's self-image on what other people think of us, we also affect another's self-image by what we think of them. This is an ongoing game in society, the mutually interdependent mirroring back and forth of self-images, from others to oneself and from oneself to others. It is natural to have an impression and opinion of another person, especially when he or she is connected to our personal life. In fact, it is impossible not to have an opinion. Such an opinion may relate to aspects such as their general appearance, the state of their mind or emotions, their spiritual development, and so forth. If we like someone, this usually means that we have a self-image of them that is pleasing to us, and we may enjoy spending time in their company; or we may simply appreciate another person without having a personal connection. Whether consciously or subconsciously, we are constantly formulating opinions of the people around us. Of course, the accuracy of our opinions depends on our own objectivity, sensitivity, and general knowledge of human beings. Often people form entirely wrong images of others because of their own projections that obscure their ability to really see the other person. People constantly project their own limitations and emotional inadequacies on others, resulting in them having a highly inaccurate image of that other person.

Our interpretation of others often affects what they think of themselves and the sense they have of their own self-image. This is especially true when we voice our opinions to them. It is important that we do not mistake having an opinion with having a judgment, as people often confuse the two terms. An opinion of another is an intention of seeing another in an objective manner without emotional investment. An opinion, even if critical, gives the other person a space, or freedom, in which he can receive that opinion and, if he wishes to, use it as healthy feedback to modify himself and his self-image. On the other hand, a judgment has emotional investment, which is almost always negative, and is telling us as much or more about ourselves than it is about the other person.

Some people are very judgmental about others without being able to acknowledge their own flaws. In Jesus' words, "And why worry about a speck in your friend's eye when you have a log in your own?" We must be able to see and have compassion for our own flaws before we can have compassion for those we judge.



Similarly, just as we must learn to work in a healthy and positive way with our own self-image, we must take responsibility for how we influence others' self-images by learning to see them objectively and constructively. Above all, to the extent we can, we need to see others from our soul to theirs. We need to see others from the place of love and higher intelligence, beyond possible flaws in their behavior and personality. By seeing the goodness in the other person rather than focusing on the negative, we open the space for a truly conscious and loving relationship, while at the same time maintaining a requisite level of objectivity.

Clinging to Self-image as Misguided Self-love

It is easy to understand why people want to have a positive image in society. This creates the prospect of receiving attention and love from other people. But why do they care so much about their image to themselves? Why the never-ending concern and desperation about the internal approval? It is quite mysterious, and considering that our self-image is not who we essentially are, there is no logical explanation, other than seeing this phenomenon as a misguided self-love. Everyone wants to like who they are, and if their self-image does not fit what they deem to be likable criteria, it will create inner conflict and self-criticism. Since no one is perfect, there is a constant internal struggle to maintain the status quo of a positive self-image, which often results in hypocrisy and a refusal to look at the truth.

We humans have not learned how to have a conscious and loving relationship with our own selves – even on a purely psychological level, not to speak of the deeper self-love that is spiritual and non-conceptual. These things are not even being taught. From the beginning of their lives, children are brainwashed to identify with their superficial psychologies and self-images rather than with their inner beings. Underlying the desire to have a positive self-image is the mistaken sense that one can love oneself because one is approved of and loved by others. But this mistakenly associates love with an image, and one which is almost always artificial, rather than endowed with the love inherent to our essential self.

It is natural to have some emotional identification with our self-image, and this helps motivate us to monitor and improve the quality of who we are and the behavior which is a product of that. But this identification can be a relaxed one experienced from our fundamental identification with our soul, so that we are not so emotionally invested in our image that we feel our happiness depends on it. When our being is filled with self-love, we do not need additional approval from



our mind – including from its sense of others’ opinions – that we are good enough. Self-love is the ground of true independence from our relative identification with self-image. Our image will then be naturally aligned with this self-love and adjust itself in a healthy way when that is required.

Self-image and Spiritual Ego

The spiritual ego is a strange creature indeed. It exploits spiritual values, like the realization of light or purity, in order to promote its own agenda. Such an ego can express itself in many ways, but the most usual example is when it uses the path to inflate its personal pride based on real or imagined achievements. Another common example is the spiritual ego’s attempt to act in an artificially moral and saintly manner in order to fit the collective image of what it means to be spiritual, or even holy.

An ego-saint is either hypocritical or a prisoner to its own rules of idealism. When such an ego is purely hypocritical, it is not even able to follow its own moral principles, although it pretends to, or it imposes on itself an excessive discipline so that it will more closely fit a saintly model’s image. When it is purely idealistic, it is simply judgmental about the nature of reality and unable to reconcile human imperfection with spiritual freedom. In both these cases – hypocritical or idealistic – the ego is living a fantasy and a lie.

It is noble to be a person of integrity on the human level, but this should not be confused with cultivating an outward show of moral perfection and a rigid compliance with what are considered the rules for a religious or spiritual life. An example of such misguided behavior is the practice of celibacy, where natural needs are repressed to emulate a model of renunciation. Such behavior has no connection with a spiritual path, and yet many people enslave themselves to such alleged spiritual ideals in the mistaken belief that outer behavior in itself makes one spiritual. One who walks the path should rather serve the soul, surrendering to one’s pure nature, and be attentive to the guidance of inner discernment and wisdom. In doing this, one’s relative human self, including one’s image, will naturally reconcile itself to – and align with – one’s inner reality.



Spiritual Role of Self-image

While self-image originally developed for use in a social context, it also has an important job to play in our spiritual evolution. Its role here is to reflect the identity of our true self beyond the mind. When one awakens to the light of me, one must identify with it conceptually and intuitively, and one can only do so with one's self-image. Even if one fails to acknowledge any self beyond awakening, as in non-duality, having the concept of "There is no one, no me" is also a form of self-image: a sort of negative self-image based on the denial of one's individual subjectivity. Although to know oneself as a soul is non-conceptual, the mind has to create a second layer, or a reflected relative recognition, on top of pure knowing to confirm the experience and realization.

Another important role of a spiritual self-image is more psychological in nature, where we are checking our progress and verifying our commitment to the path. If we are lazy, we must see and acknowledge this in our self-image and then aspire to improve ourselves. If we are not sincere with ourselves in our spiritual self-image – such as pretending to be better than we are – we must become aware of this and have an active intention to change in order to be able to move forward.

It is important that one's spiritual self-image comes from one's inner reality, rather than filtered through, and contaminated by, one's ego, with all of its psychological issues, such as complexes, emotional inadequacies, inhibitions, and neuroses. When one becomes aware of not being fully sincere or dedicated, or of not serving the highest good of one's soul, this should be recognized for just what it is: a plain fact. Acknowledging this fact should provide the motivation and correct action to transform and transcend the issues involved. If this is difficult to achieve initially, one keeps trying until the desired improvement is attained.

It is very common for a seeker to become stuck in self-judgment, self-condemnation, or even self-hatred when they becomes aware of aspects that need improvement, like insincerity and lack of dedication. Not only does this not serve any purpose, but it makes matters worse. To indulge in such reactions, because we feel that our self-image is tarnished or less than perfect, is a sheer waste of time on the spiritual path. The goal of the path is to get in touch with our ultimate value, the unconditional love that constitutes the very being of our soul. Even when we find we have negative aspects in our self-image, we should embrace whatever these may be with pure self-



love and unconditional forgiveness. Such forgiveness is not indulgence, as it calls for action and change, while also freeing us from the poison of guilt.

On the plus side, it is perfectly appropriate to have a positive self-image on the path, such as confirming to oneself that "I have attained pure consciousness" or "I have reached the absolute state." Naturally, there is satisfaction in having reached the desired goal, but this positive self-image is without any sense of arrogance, as it originates from our higher inner identity, rather than from identification with our ego. When the ego uses spiritual achievements in an impure way to promote a self-image of pride or superiority over others, it is attempting to usurp the truth of the soul in compensation for its emotional inadequacies and other psychological shortcomings.

Transparent Self-image

The problem with the faculty of self-image is that it is commonly experienced in an obsessive way, much as if one is continually performing or being filmed for an audience. People keep creating their self-image all of their waking time, except in rare moments when they are spaced-out or too busy or distracted to think about themselves. One of the important accomplishments in the integration of our relative mind with our pure nature is to reach freedom from the normally automatic and compulsive mechanism of self-image. This is achieved by establishing a continuity of recognition of our essential self combined with a continuity of surrender. As long as we are dominated by the observer, we remain imprisoned in the incessant play of its inferior self-imagining. Even if our self-image is being formed from the right place and is based on objective truth, the very compulsion to keep recreating it over and over again is a negative distraction on the path and indicates our work of integration is not complete.

Since self-image is created by the observer, it is the observer which has to be transformed through its unification with conscious me and pure consciousness. Only then can it be released from the shackles of endless, self-image creations and modifications. In doing this, we relinquish our more superficial identification with personality and our lower nature in favor of a higher identity beyond the mind.

After our identity has become established in pure subjectivity and reaches transparency with the observer, our human consciousness returns to the state of natural emptiness and innocence, where the need to create or reformulate our self-image arises only occasionally – and in a healthy way



when it does. At this stage, the faculty of self-image has finally been integrated with our pure nature of non-self-conscious consciousness and intelligence. Being pure in this way is living beyond personality and beyond the observer, living from the place where self-image is naturally in a state of balance between our original emptiness and a gentle and loving identification with our human self.

Blessings,
Anadi

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