

Ego, Attachment & Spiritual Work

Our teaching describes the personal sense of self or ego as a partial or qualified form of the Divine and Universal Self. Both systems affirm that the small subjective feeling of 'I' that we know as 'me' will realise its true identity as universal and divine by giving up its habitual attachment to the body, the mind and all objects of any kind.

We would probably all agree on a definition of ego as a sense of personal identity — and 'attachment' as the ego's tendency to claim and to take on the character of the objects it is attracted to. Simple enough so far; nevertheless, confusion persists around the value and significance of both these human attributes because whilst they receive positive status from psychology, on the spiritual path they are usually regarded as worthless hindrances, the root of all ignorance that must somehow be abandoned.

Ego (Latin for the pronoun 'I') is often confused with egotism (i.e. self-conceit) and then seen as the antithesis of Self (Atman) despite being in fact a limited version of the same thing. Ego and Self appear to be separate because of the different levels at which they operate. The *Mundaka Upanishad* explains this apparent duality by using the metaphor of two birds; '*companions who are always united and who cling to the selfsame tree*'. One of the birds faces towards the world and engages in constant activity, enjoying the fruits of the tree, both sweet and bitter, while the other — desireless — simply looks on in silent witness.

The extroverted bird, representing the 'worldly' ego, has received much more attention from the field of psychology because this aspect of self comes into prominence in the first few decades of life and in developmental terms acts like a mirror for all the nature and nurture it has absorbed since conception. Serious spiritual work on the other hand often develops in the second half of life after the establishment of the normal life-tasks which always requires the exercise of much 'ego strength'. The popular conception is that at this point the ego should be forcibly rooted out in the interests of spiritual progress.

Does this mean that all the effort involved in establishing a 'secure' ego in the first place — all those childhood struggles with siblings, clashes with authority and inner battles with the dragon of sloth and torpor — must now go to waste? Is its continued existence entirely counter-productive? There is much evidence that frustration (with oneself) promotes consciousness, as personal limitations clash with ideals and fantasies. Besides, the greater the degree of consciousness won by the emerging ego the greater the possibility of sensing what is not known.

It is hard to see how any truly 'ego-less' spiritual practice can be maintained when all 'paths' require the practise of patience, determination and perseverance in the face of frustrations and unconscious resistance. Self-control is itself an act of will exerted by ego. Ego and 'will' are intimately connected and frustration — and all the friction created by the struggle between 'yes' and 'no' — produces an energy vital to their development.

Another more inclusive view is that ego does not need restraining but, paradoxically, should be encouraged to expand until ultimately personal identity transcends the limitations of body, mind, heart, job, money, reputation etc., to become one with the Cosmos itself. One might ask if this would not lead to an ego-inflation of psychotic proportions? It would not — because inflation involves fantasies of *personal* aggrandisement. Expansion, on the other hand, lifts the ego beyond personal desire and choice, allowing it to enter a new dimension where there is no sense of needing *any* thing because the ego has literally *become* every thing.

Sri Shantananda Saraswati explains this form of expansion further.

When you reach the idea that everything belongs to you then something peculiar happens. If everything belonged to you, you would not be able to have a particular claim for a particular thing. It follows that everything personal about the ego would then disappear and identification would be with the whole since no duality would persist. A natural and unforced diminishment of personal ego would be accomplished.

It has been said that the only legitimate kind of attachment is to Atman itself. If ego learns to replace desires for 'things' with the desire for the Self, then it will surely become that Self (or 'realise' that it is that Self) in just the same way as the ego 'becomes' the current object of its desire. The Saint Ramakrishna held his pupil Vivekananda's head under the water until he almost drowned, saying, 'If you could desire the Self as much as you just now desired to breathe, the Self would appear instantaneously.'

His Holiness does not make much distinction between ego (ahankar) and attachment. On one occasion He was asked:

Q. In order to surrender oneself fully to the Absolute must all ego first be removed?

HH. After all — what is ego? It is one's attachment to a thing, and attachment has to start with Self. Either you attach the Self to the body, or to the mind, or to the Self itself. You can do whatever you like, but in each case it is this relationship of the Self — either to a limited thing, or to a large thing, or to the unlimited.

In fact the body, the mind, the universe — whatever we have here is all one, but we (still) have to come out in some way and make a claim on some particular thing. If we know the whole thing belongs to the Absolute, then even if we are making a claim to our body, we are not really establishing a deep relationship, or bondage between our Self and things because a claim has to be made. The world is there for action and enjoyment, but without (personal) attachment. This one has to learn. Then ego will be there but without any trouble to the individual'.

Note: In his first sentence HH appears to use 'ego' (ahankar) and 'Self' interchangeably — underlining the fact that 'ahankar' refers to that aspect of Self which gets identified or attached to outer objects, thus falling under the illusion that it is finite instead of infinite.

