

Origins of Personality

At our last meeting we started to talk about where personality originates and how it is now thought that the process may start at the moment of conception. Even the tiny single cell from which we begin has receptors that respond to stress hormones in the mother and possibly also to the emotional energy fields affecting its environment. Basic reactions to these influences can be passed on to all the ever-growing number of cells that make up the organism, the body/mind.

Ego, or personality, is a *process* of establishing relationships. Relationships with the world and the people in it. Without the fundamental duality of a relationship there can't be an ego.

In the Advaita system the true basis of reality is non-dual. There is only One and we, all of us, *are* that One. Here, there is no relationship, there is nothing to relate with or to. This is really beyond the mind, but it is a concept that can serve to allow the mind to transcend its own limitations.

The whole manifest universe is said to be a kind of illusion – Maya – an infinite hall of mirrors reflecting the relationships of apparently separate objects. As soon as Atman, the One, becomes embodied as a 'separate being' into this illusory world, the duality begins. As the cellular embryo grows into a foetus and then an infant the process is one of ever-multiplying relationships. At first within the mother during gestation and then, at birth, with the world 'out there' and all the people in it. Any particular relationship or situation causes us to respond in a particular way, probably right down to the cellular level, establishing a pattern of response that resonates throughout the whole body/mind long before we become aware of it.

From the moment of conception the human being is learning and establishing ways to relate. Both the mother and the world present good things and bad things – Maya is a tricky place – and the embryo and the infant child must inevitably learn ways to relate to both. These ways of relating become habitual reactions which form what we call character or personality. (Generally, the 'good' relationships build up our conscious sense of self and the 'bad' relationships get pushed into the unconscious shadow-self from where they are projected onto *other* people.)

From about seven years of age we have fixed the basic range of strategies with which we relate to the world and this bundle of strategies makes up the character we feel as 'me' – as something always constant in a changing world. We take this 'me' to be who we really are but actually it is what overlays and obscures the truly real 'I', the Atman, which is eternal, beyond birth and death and all duality. *Me*' is actually what 'I am not'.

The Shankaracharya illustrates this with a story of two ants, one living on a mountain of salt and the other on a mountain of sugar. The sugar ant says to the salty ant, 'I don't know why you bother with that sour old stuff, come over and taste some of my lovely sugar. It's blissful, you'll never look back once you've tried it.' But the salty ant is canny and suspicious. Salt is the only thing it really knows and it has come rather to like it. So before setting out on the journey it takes a good mouthful of salt and keeps it under its tongue for comfort and security. Of course when it gets to the sugar mountain it can't taste the pure sweetness at all and its suspicions are confirmed.

Just so do we cling to our personalities, holding on to them so tightly that we can hardly ever taste the sweet bliss of who we *really* are. Even when we get the idea that we could understand ourselves a bit better and perhaps come to regard our personalities not as '*me*' but simply as an attribute, like my face or my hand, it is still the same old personality doing the knowing and so nothing much can come of it. The salt of personality has become so ingrained that we never even notice it, even when we tell ourselves we are making mighty efforts to see it and leave it behind!

So why even bother to try? Well, the Shankaracharya explains that the illusion of becoming a separate 'being' is a process and that coming out of that illusion is also a process. Both processes are illusory but the one is needed to displace the other, as a thorn is used to remove another thorn. He says:

Before assuming this seat of Shankaracharya, much *internal analysis* had to be done and nearly fifty years were spent in the search. The tradition in India allows one to search until one reaches complete stillness and peace and then a life of service to others takes over completely.

We simply need to know ourselves well enough so that we can allow this complete stillness and peace to arise. That peace and stillness is the first intimation of who we really are, Atman. As our System says too, we need to observe what it is, the particular habitual, individual, set of impressions, resonances, that constantly takes us away from a 'state of attention'.

Talking about this to Peter Fenwick the other day, he said:

Yes, that's correct, but don't forget that these resonances are very, very subtle and long-standing. What the group needs to do is to track with great accuracy and precision the *moment of perception* and observe how this is instantly subjectivised, *so that we can see how all our understanding only occurs in an egoic frame*. Touch the world and until you're clean (still) you see only ego-reflection!

So although we do need to know who we're 'not' and be able to observe the 'frame of the ego' more clearly, the way to go is not to become too focused on it but just keep on building up the habit of dropping into stillness momentarily, as much as possible through every day. For a moment, when we drop everything and allow this stillness, we are at the point of perception, the bare awareness of what *is now*. For a moment we can be 'clean', without all the ego's baggage. This point of perception is the gateway to the eternal world of Atman, who I really am.

As Dr Roles said, it is only a matter of frequency and duration. Let it happen more often and for longer.

G.B.

