

Ego, Awakening, and Psycho-Spiritual Development

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This paper discusses the formation of “ego” in early childhood, and the process of “awakening” from this false sense of self – a process necessary in order to exercise actual free will, and achieve our true human potential. Once we realize that our identity is based on only a very small portion of our actual capabilities and that our responses to people and things in our environment are almost entirely habitual, we can – through this awareness - begin to develop qualities that expand our range of behavior, improve our ability to act spontaneously and non-habitually in the world, create more meaningful relationships, reduce stress, increase our general level of happiness, and possibly even find true purpose and meaning in our lives. This developmental process usually begins as a psychological one - but often turns into a spiritual journey. This is because, once we see behind or through the false nature of the ego, we begin to discover something else that is much more interesting – and ultimately exciting - than just ourselves.

The Nature of the Ego

The word “ego” is Latin, meaning “I” – and is often used in English to refer to the “self,” “identity,” or other related concepts. Freud defined the ego as that part of our mind which is primarily conscious, acting as the negotiator between the Id’s instinctual needs and the socially acceptable means by which those needs might be realized. It is now more loosely defined in psychology as a person’s identity, or sense of who they are. Spiritual definitions of the ego are more inclined to point out the false nature of our individual identities, and often refer to the ego as a “false self,” “conceptual identity,” or “identification with individual existence.” However, psychologists and spiritualists alike will both agree that - to some degree – the ego is never a “true” sense of who a person is.

From a spiritual standpoint, the ego is not aware of its own divine nature or spiritual “essence” (literally its own Godlike potential), and from a psychological standpoint the ego uses a host of defense mechanisms, habitual conditioning, and belief systems to project only the “self-sense” or identity it wants itself and others to think it is.

The ego comes into existence almost at birth. It is preset with a certain genetic coding that sets the stage for who it will become. However, it also interacts with significant others (mainly parents, then other relatives, friends, schoolmates, teachers, etc.) who shape the way these genetic pre-dispositions are expressed.

One way of looking at ego formation is through “object relations” theory which views human relationships to be the driving motivational force in life. However, the object of these relationships can refer to more than another person. It can also include food, alcohol, sex, money, fast cars, political opinions – anything around which we can build a self-structure or personality. We can even build an identity around being a spiritual person, but this would also create a false structure and a limited sense of self.

An underlying force beneath these relationships is the “pleasure principle” – or the child’s tendency to feel “I like this,” or “I don’t like that.” The child’s ego is also molded by its attempts to “mirror” the behavior of its parents and certain significant others, while also needing the perceived approval of those significant others around it. A child’s cumulative experiences eventually cluster into certain types of related events, and then a self picture begins to emerge: “I am good at this but not very good at that,” “I am smart, but I’m not creative,” “I’m a boy and I must behave in a certain way or I will be disapproved of,” “I like grapes, but I don’t like apples,” “this is the correct way to tie my shoes,” and the list goes on and on.

So the ego is formed very early in life when the child is most vulnerable and needy. It distorts who the child really is by limiting its self-concept to only those attributes which have been reinforced by parents and significant others. This reinforcement can be either positive or negative creating both positive and negative self-images, and also affects who the child thinks it “isn’t” as well as who it thinks it “is.” For instance, if a child grows up being told by its parents that it is “good,” then it will most likely form a self-image of being a good boy or girl. However, they will likely perceive themselves as being a bad boy or girl if told they are “bad” all the time by their parents. Either ego identification can be damaging to the child growing up. A “good” boy or girl might over-idealize certain qualities of goodness and then constantly chastise their self and others for not being good enough. While a “bad” boy or girl might act out, or unconsciously sabotage their relationships with others - thereby making their sense of badness a self-fulfilling prophecy.

In a similar manner, the child’s ego can grow to express many wonderful

qualities and attributes of the child, but it also represses many other wonderful qualities and attributes that are part of the child's potential. This potential cannot be expressed as long as the child has never had those qualities positively reinforced by significant others. Even the best parents will unconsciously create a limited sense of self in their children, because they have their own ideas about what is good for the child. As long as the parents have any preferences at all about how the child should behave, these preferences will be reflected in the child's ego to the exclusion of others.

Through this process, the ego literally becomes attached or identified with certain aspects of its potential, to the exclusion of other aspects of its potential. To make it worse, the ego is unaware it is doing this. It just thinks this is the way it is. And, as long as we remain unaware of these attachments, we will continue to think, feel, and act habitually – with little or no free will to choose any alternative way of being.

Awakening

Whether you are seeing a psychologist or a guru, if you wish to progress in your development beyond simply having a “normal” ego you must become awakened to the “truth” of this situation I have just described. Who you think you are, is not really you! You have been conditioned since childbirth to think, feel, behave, act, react in a certain way that does not even come close to expressing your potential as a human being. And the problem is that everyone else has been also. Human beings need the approval of other human beings. That is why we are so reluctant to see the truth and break free of these restrictive patterns. We are caught in a web of social object relations that keeps us glued into a role that doesn't stand out too much, or go too much against the grain. We are scared to death of being different – or at least so different that no one else can relate to us.

Awakening simply means becoming aware of this fact, and then engaging in a process of self-reflection to discover why we do the things that we do. You might discover that the reason you are angry at your friend is not because she is so narcissistic and self-centered – but maybe it is because you are. “Projection” is the defense mechanism we use to avoid looking at the things we don't like so much about ourselves, and we instead unconsciously accuse others of our own negative qualities. So, rather than remain angry with your friend – increasing your cortisol and stress levels for days, and maybe seriously injuring your relationship – perhaps you could use the incident as a learning experience, to help chip away at your own narcissism and self-centeredness.

In fact, almost every time you react to another person or an event in a manner that elicits a negative emotion – hatred, anger, disgust, envy, jealousy, fear – is a time when you are actually reacting to one of your own ego attachments. It could be that someone disagrees with a closely held belief or opinion, an idea you have about right vs. wrong, morals, values, culture, likes/dislikes – or maybe they are triggering an old wound developed during childhood; one that makes you feel “not good enough” or “unloved” or “unwanted” or “not valuable.”

You can make the choice to go through life unconscious, and continue reacting habitually to all of your old ego attachments, identifications and wounds. This is what the Buddhists usually refer to as “suffering.” Or you can awaken and take charge of your life, be honest with yourself, start making the growth choices, and continually work on your own development by identifying your ego attachments and allowing your actions to emerge from your “True Nature” – which is pure potential – rather than from your conditioned and limited behavior. This process is the only way you can ever truly have free will.

So, What is Spirituality?

My experience has been that the word “spirit” is over-used and poorly understood. In our increasingly secular Western society we hear people using the word “spirituality” more frequently than ever before. Many people use the word to distinguish themselves from those that are “religious,” as if religious people couldn’t possibly also be spiritual. Many people claim they have a “spiritual practice,” which might include anything and everything from meditation or prayer, to spiritual readings (such as the Bible, Yoga Sutras, Kabbalah, Bhagavad Gita, etc.), group meetings, affirmations, and rituals; to special cleansing diets, exercises, physical postures, and breathing; to elaborate moral and behavioral systems of conduct designed and practiced to achieve “right mind,” “right action,” etc. There is also an increasing acknowledgement of the different forms of spirituality available in the world – whether it be Christian, Moslem, Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Gnostic, Native American, Druid, Mayan. Some people follow no particular brand of spirituality, but are instead of the mystical tradition, preferring the personal experience of all states of consciousness – including those that might lead to a direct communion with God, or Spirit.

Various definitions of spirituality exist that can be very confusing, and I find rather other-worldly. For instance, it can refer to “an ultimate or immaterial

reality,” the “incorporeal soul of man”, the “Divine ground of existence,” a connection with “God,” or that which is “sacred and religious.” Traditionally, many religions have regarded spirituality as an integral aspect of religious experience. However, modern secular views of spirituality tend to focus on a person discovering the “essence” of his/her being, or the deepest values, meaning, and qualities by which one lives – qualities such as love, compassion, empathy, patience, tolerance, understanding, truth, will, forgiveness, contentment, joy, responsibility, strength, and the list goes on.

This viewpoint is expanding, perhaps because of a growing awareness of the inhumanity, corruption, and abuse of power that flows from an entirely materialistic and individualistic society. Just seeing the “Truth” for what it is in today’s world, and doing something about it, seems like a form of spirituality to me. But perhaps the real basis for spirituality is the concept of “unity.” As we awaken, and struggle to remove ourselves from the tiny box our egos place us in, continually expanding our sense of self, we seem to move increasingly in the direction of a deeper experience of oneness and interconnectedness with all else there is. We cannot help but become more aware there is really only one large interconnected system out there, and each of us are like a single cell of this system, composed of the same DNA located in every other cell. And, all together, we add up to a whole that is so much more than the sum of its parts. We grow to realize there are no real differences between people except for our personal physical circumstances and petty ideologies. Our minds become more inclusive and accepting of differences. And finally, once we lose our ego’s need to be critical and non-accepting of others, we will find connection and unity.

Various psychological theories of human development have moved into the spiritual realms, as it should be based on the evolution of psychology I have outlined in a prior paper. Don Beck’s theory of Spiral Dynamics clearly outlines the history of our planet as the movement of societies from clans, to tribes, to city-states, to countries, and currently we are moving into increasingly larger forms of human organization. At each new level of complexity and organization there is a corresponding increase in consciousness to include a more profound understanding of our dependency and interconnection with an increasingly larger group of people – with a corresponding and necessary increase in the tolerance for alternative viewpoints, greater inclusion, and a more encompassing sense of oneness.

In my classes on Psycho-Spiritual Development, I have not wanted to exclude anybody’s version of spirituality, but we have to start somewhere. So for

starting purposes, I like to use the work of Aldous Huxley, who wrote a famous book titled the ***Perennial Philosophy***. His research for this book included nearly all of the worlds' great religious and spiritual traditions, past and present, and he discovered there were four basic doctrines underlying all their teachings:

1. Everything we know of as the “world” – including ourselves, our consciousness, other people, things – arises from a “Divine Ground:” a formless, timeless, changeless, unending foundation for everything else there is. If we think of this Divine Ground as the ocean - then the earth, us, and everything we can see, touch, think, or feel are like the waves upon the ocean's surface. We have been given the opportunity to briefly experience time, space, and change in a material world, but are still composed of the same timeless, formless substance as the ocean beneath us – and to the ocean we will again return.
2. Human beings can learn certain things about the Divine Ground by gaining knowledge, but we can also intuitively experience the existence of this Divine Ground. However, for this to occur most people must first become aware of their own Divine Spark – or piece of the Divine Ground – within them. Many people who believe in “God,” believe it to be an entity outside of themselves. They do not understand that they have this same pure potential within them. They must then rely on faith to support their beliefs. Direct intuition of the Divine Ground comes from actually feeling a connection between one's own Divine Spark and that of the Divine Ground.
3. Human beings have a dual nature: their pure Essential Self, and their egoic self. Identification with a person's egoic sense of self is normal. We may choose to remain identified with our egoic self – which creates a limited sense of identity, a distorted view of reality, and a lot of needless unhappiness and suffering; or we can choose to identify with our Spirit or Essence, and through it with the Divine Ground.
4. There is only one true purpose for a person's life on Earth: to identify with his/her Divine spark (Essence, Spirit, Real Self), and thereby achieve a unitive connection between themselves and the Divine Ground.

At this point many philosophies differ considerably about what this fourth point looks like. Some religions say this unity can only be achieved at death. Others believe a person can become one with the Divine while still living. Some believe that the purpose of becoming Divine while still living is to unite with

others to create a “heaven on earth.” Others believe we are here so that God can experience the joys and sensations of a material existence. And, still others believe the Universe or God is evolving, and that human beings are the agents of this evolution through our gift of consciousness. I am sure there are many other theories, but these are a few that I am familiar with. Perhaps there is some truth in all of them.

Psycho-Spiritual Development

If we are to believe the great religious and spiritual traditions of the past and present, human beings have fallen asleep as to their true nature. Everyone is born as pure essence, but almost immediately the child begins to experience a sense of lacking, neediness, unworthiness, danger, and tension. Even the best-intentioned parents cannot help but contribute to these experiences, which eventually influence the child to lose touch with her/his essential nature. Parents will almost always inadvertently favor certain forms of behavior and qualities over others, forcing the child to embrace certain attributes in order to be loved, while also causing the child to de-emphasize or even reject other attributes if they are met with perceived disapproval. Habits are formed, and defense mechanisms come into play – eventually forming what we call the personality or ego.

We tell ourselves stories about who we are in order to reinforce these self-images – “I am strong, no one can hurt me, I can do it alone, I don’t need anyone, etc.” These stories always have an element of truth to them, but are never the complete story of who we really are. But we do mistake this personality – along with its limited conception of Self – for who we really are, and then we spend the rest of our lives defending, fighting, living up to the stories we have told ourselves about ourselves. The result is the Biblical story of Adam falling from grace with God. We are doomed to live a life that is unhappy, stressful, combative, needy, worrisome, deceitful, and without the connection to others we all desire.

My personal belief is that we can’t get to our own spiritual or essential nature without first doing the psychological work. I use the term “enlightenment” a lot in my classes, and we hear it more so each day in the culture around us. Enlightenment refers to this process of becoming our “essential” or “true” nature.

Jack Engler, a well-known psychotherapist and Buddhist scholar believes that the process of enlightenment is more of an unfolding – something that occurs in

stages for those who stick with it. At each stage, the relationship of our understanding of our Ultimate nature to our ego changes. We unveil our true self slowly, one layer at a time. Every time we realize that our anger at another person is really our own projection of what we don't like about ourselves; every time we stop ourselves from saying something sarcastic and instead extend ourselves empathetically to someone we care about; every time we realize the voice of self-criticism in our heads is really just an old childhood message left over from our parents; every time we have one of these "aha" insights into our own nature that results in positive change – we are becoming a little more enlightened.

Many spiritual disciplines stress a direct communion with God and/or the complete annihilation of one's ego. However, I personally do not believe one can make this journey without an ego, because the process of becoming enlightened can be viewed primarily as a psychological one. During this process of enlightenment there is great value in having a strong mature ego. In fact, this is exactly what is required for accurate self-reflection. A strong ego is NOT one that is set in its ways. On the contrary, a strong ego is one that is NOT heavily defended, and is therefore flexible and changeable – constantly improving based on reflection, feedback, experience, and/or a changing environment.

Only a mature ego has the ability to truthfully evaluate the subjective nature of our self-perceptions – rooting out our illusions of reality, delusions of who we are, discerning why we cause unhappiness in ourselves and others, and how we might change to make things better. Only a strong ego can correctly identify our true essence when it does arise, and not mistake it for something else. And, without these realizations and accurate guideposts to help us along the way, we will never find enlightenment.

Unless we first go through this process of strengthening the ego – to the point where we can truly discern between truth and fantasy, and it becomes a valuable tool in our quest to attain enlightenment – our weaker egos will just re-arrange themselves and begin to identify with the objects of our spirituality. We might then think of ourselves as a spiritual person - but we will still get angry, hold grudges, remain distant from other people, be judgmental, intolerant, unhappy, dishonest, and think ourselves to be better than others. You don't want to do this. This is not enlightenment, but just another egoic pattern of habitual behavior revolving around our basic need to be somebody. Instead, the only way to your True Nature is through your ego, and this journey – at least in its initial phases - is primarily a psychological one.