

THE NATURE OF THE HUMAN EGO

'As long as you take yourself to be a person, a body, a mind, separate from the stream of life, having a will of its own, pursuing its own aims, you are living merely on the surface and whatever you do will be short-lived and of little value, mere straws to feed the flames of vanity.'

Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj

Multiple Selves or 'I's'

Most people lack a stable, unified consciousness and are prey to the fluctuations of their minds. Because they are at the mercy of outer and inner influences, their behaviour will vary as a function of their mood and their state of health. Ramana Maharshi: "An 'I' rises forth with every thought and with its disappearance that 'I' disappears too. Many 'I's' are born and die every moment." Yet it is characteristic of undeveloped humanity to assume that they have a coherent, stabilized personality. In actual fact they have a multiple and changing personality. "You have to know, and to feel, how many 'people' there are in you. You may feel like one person, but in reality you are many."

The Commanding Self is composed of a complex of "selves." This is the totality of what the ordinary (raw) man or woman considers their personality. It is characterized by a shifting series of moods and personalities whose rapidity of movement gives the individual the impression that his consciousness is constant or a unity. It is not in fact so. (1)

One of the starting points in many esoteric teachings is the proposition that there is an absence of unity and a permanent 'I' in almost all so-called normal human beings. "You have been continually changing; you are in a state of flux. No identity of yours has remained as a permanent feature." Gurdjieff forcefully articulated this vital idea:

In reality there is no oneness in man and there is no controlling center, no permanent "I" or Ego. This is the general picture of man. Every thought, every feeling, every sensation, every desire, every like and dislike is an "I." These "I's" are not connected and are not coordinated in any way. Each of them depends on the change in external circumstances, and on the change of impressions. Some of them mechanically follow some other, and some appear always accompanied by others. But there is no order and no system in that. Each of these "I's" represent at any given moment a very small part of our "brain," "mind" or "intelligence," but each of them means itself to represent *the whole*. When man says "I" it sounds as if he meant the whole of himself, but really when he himself thinks that he means it, it is only a passing thought, a passing mood, or passing desire. In an hour's time he may completely forget it, and with the same conviction

express an opposite opinion, opposite view, opposite interests. The worst of it is that man does not remember it. In most cases he believes in the last “I” which expressed itself, as long as it lasts: that is, as long as another “I” – sometimes quite unconnected with the preceding one – does not express its opinion or its desires louder than the first. (2)

Teachers from many spiritual traditions assert that our states of mind are in constant flux and forever changing. A permanent unchanging self does not exist except conceptually:

Each of you has different roles in this life, each of you wears many different hats, but are you fundamentally aware of your own true person? Who is the real you? There is no unchanging ego, there is no entity called a soul. Everything is constantly changing in the stream of cause and effect. What has appeared vividly one moment is gone the next. Moment after moment, it streams along. Beyond this coming and going, this appearing and disappearing, there is nothing else. Phenomena are coming and going, and when you ask what is real, you have already missed it. It’s gone. We pass from one conditioned state of mind to another. (3)

The many contradictory “I’s” in a person cause all sorts of problems in the everyday life of the raw, undeveloped individual. “This explains why people so often make decisions and so seldom carry them out . . . or a small accidental “I” may promise something to someone else at a certain moment simply out of vanity or for amusement and the person may have to pay for it all their life.” Allegories are employed in certain spiritual teachings to convey the idea of multiple “I’s” and lack of overall conscious coordination in most human beings. For instance, Gurdjieff compared the chaotic state of most people’s inner life to a house with servants but no master:

Eastern teachings contain various allegorical pictures which endeavour to portray the nature of man’s being from this point of view. Thus, in one teaching, man is compared to a house in which there is a multitude of servants but no master and no steward. The servants have all forgotten their duties; no one wants to do what he ought; everyone tries to be master, if only for a moment; and, in this kind of disorder, the house is threatened with grave danger. The only chance of salvation is for a group of the more sensible servants to meet together and elect a *temporary* steward, that is, a *deputy steward*. This *deputy steward* can then put the other servants in their places and make each do his own work; the cook in the kitchen, the coachman in the stables, the gardener in the garden, and so on. In this way the ‘house’ can be got ready for the arrival of the real steward who will, in his turn, prepare it for the arrival of the master. The comparison of a man to a house awaiting the arrival of the master is frequently met with in Eastern teachings which have preserved traces of ancient knowledge, and, as we know, the subject appears under various forms in many of the parables in the Gospels. (4)

Since each individual is composed of countless “I’s” which alternate as circumstances and external conditions change, any attempt to find a single, unchanging “I” in the undeveloped human being is fruitless. Yet behind this kaleidoscope of “selves” there remains the substratum of our Real Self, the eternal timeless state of presence and being:

Q: So the individual does not exist as an isolated entity. But does not the personality exist as a unique part of the whole?

A: The person is really only persona, mask, but it has come to be synonymous with the idea of an individual, separate and continuous entity. The personality is not the constant we imagine it to be. In reality it is only a temporary reorchestration of all our sense, imagination and intelligence, according to each situation. There is no repetition in life and each reorchestration is unique and original like the design in a kaleidoscope. The mistake is to identify with the personality, to conceptualize it in memory and then take ourselves for this collection of crystalized images rather than letting all emotions, perceptions and thoughts arise and die within us. We are in the theatre watching our own play on stage. The actor is always ‘behind’ his persona. He seems to be completely lost in suffering, in being a hero, a lover, a rascal, but all these appearances take place in global presence. This presence is not a detached attitude, a witnessing position. It is not a feeling of separateness, of being ‘outside.’ It is the presence of wholeness, love, out of which all comes. When no situation calls for activity we remain in emptiness of activity, in this presence. (5)

The Self-Enclosed Ego

Most of our relationships with other people and with our environment are based on a sense of separateness, thereby blocking the awareness of wholeness and the unity of all existence. “The only hindrance to the clear perception of our natural state is the forceful idea of being a separate individual living in a world with other separate beings. This fanciful idea of a self is a contraction, a limitation of wholeness, real being.” The sense of a personal existence – “I-am-so-and-so” – obscures the changeless state of pure awareness, producing alienation and suffering. “Diversity in unity is natural and good. It is only with separateness and self-seeking that real suffering appears in the world.”

In many traditional spiritual teachings the human ego is identified as the major impediment to self-realization. The illusion of a separate “I” or ego disconnected from the rest of life and the universe causes ignorance and suffering:

The Bliss of Self is always yours and you will find it if you seek it earnestly. The cause of your misery is not in your outer life; it is in you, as your ego. You impose limitations on yourself and then make a vain struggle to transcend them. All

unhappiness is due to the ego. With it comes all your trouble. What does it avail you to attribute the cause of misery to the happenings of life when the cause is really within you? What happiness can you get from things extraneous to yourself? When you get it how long will it last? If you would deny the ego and scorch it by ignoring it you would be free. (6)

Buddhist teachings assert that the fundamental cause of human suffering is the sense of a separate self -- human beings are prisoners of their egos, which create a false duality of self and others:

Your mind can be compared to a mirror, which reflects everything that appears before it. From the time you began to think, to feel, and to exert your will, shadows are cast upon your mind which distort its reflection. This condition we call delusion, which is the fundamental sickness of human beings. The most serious effect of this sickness is that it creates a sense of duality, in consequence of which you postulate "I" and "not-I." The truth is that everything is One, and this of course is not a numerical one. Falsely seeing oneself confronted by a world of separate existences, this is what creates antagonism, greed, and, inevitably, suffering. The purpose of Zen is to wipe away from the mind these shadows or defilements so that we can intimately experience our solidarity with all life. Love and compassion then naturally and spontaneously flow forth. (7)

Human suffering arises from the creation of a separate self which is a mere fraction of our real nature. The dominant role of the ego gives rise to all the myriad problems of life. Until we clearly observe the workings of the ego, real human transformation is impossible:

Ego is the unobserved mind that runs your life when you are not present as the witnessing consciousness, the watcher. The ego perceives itself as a separate fragment in a hostile universe, with no real inner connection to any other being, surrounded by other egos which it either sees as a potential threat or which it will attempt to use for its own ends. The basic ego patterns are designed to combat its own deep-seated fear and sense of lack. They are resistance, control, power, greed, defense, attack. Some of the ego's strategies are extremely clever, yet they never truly solve any of its problems, simply because the ego itself is the problem. (8)

Human unhappiness is largely self-created and a reflection of the workings of the ego, which is constantly reacting to other people and events, blocking and distorting the natural flow of life. Memories of past events leave traces which act as conditioning elements and reinforce the self-centered activity of the ego:

The ordinary man's activity is made up of reactions which are the expressions of his egotistic makeup. He is a self surrounded by pleasant and unpleasant,

friendly or hostile objects, and everything which impinges on him incites him to react according to his desires and his fears. Consequently, all his reactions are false, fragmentary, inadequate, because they are rooted in his egoistic outlook which is born of his delusion that he is a separate self. All the traditional doctrines teach us methods by which we may come to discard this state of reaction and reach an ego-less state where all reactions cease to be, giving place to impersonal actions which are true, impartial and adequate. (9)

The operation of the self-centered ego is the chief obstacle to wholeness and self-realization. In order to embark on the journey of self-transformation, it is necessary to objectively examine and question why we think, feel and act as we do:

As long as the egoic mind is running your life, you cannot truly be at ease; you cannot be at peace or fulfilled except for brief intervals when you obtained what you wanted, when a craving has just been fulfilled. Since the ego is a derived sense of self, it needs to identify with external things. It needs to be both defended and fed constantly. The most common ego identifications have to do with possessions, the work you do, social status and recognition, knowledge and education, physical appearance, special abilities, relationships, personal and family history, belief systems, and often also political, nationalistic, racial, religious, and other collective identifications. None of these is you. (10)

The Ego is an Illusion

For most people the sense that they are a separate individual distinct from other people and surrounded by a world external to themselves is a self-evident truth. "The ego-I can be defined as the sense of oneself as an isolated being set apart from other selves – in other words, the unshakable belief that 'I am here and the world stands outside me'."

Many languages are constructed in such a fashion as to reinforce the notion of a separate self acting independently and autonomously. For example, the structure of the English language strongly emphasizes the sense of a personal "I" whose existence is responsible for our thoughts, emotions and actions:

Of the many devices employed by Ego to keep us in his power, none is more effective than language. The English language is so constructed that it demands the repeated use of the personal pronoun "I" for grammatical nicety and presumed clarity. Actually this I is no more than a figure of speech, a conventional convention, but we talk and act as though it were real and true. Listen to any conversation and see how the stress inevitably falls upon the "I" – "I said . . ." "I did . . ." "I like . . ." "I hate . . ." All this plays into the hands of the Ego, strengthening

our servitude and enlarging our sufferings, for the more we postulate this I the more we are exposed to Ego's never-ending demands. (11)

The ego is sustained by memory and habit and has no independent or continuous reality. "Thoughts, feelings and actions appear and disappear indefinitely, creating an illusion of continuity. The idea of being a person, is nothing other than an image held together by memory."

Q: If the ego is not real – that is, autonomous and continuous, what is it that functions in everyday life?

A: The ego has no concreteness, no substance, no continuity. It is a collection of thoughts held together by memory. The person appears when you think of it. When the body wakes in the morning, awareness is already there. You may not have noticed it but it is so. This awareness is not a thought, not a subject, nor a feeling. It finds no concretization. Moments later, habit associates awareness with a body and a personality. Then you say, 'I am this. I am that.' (12)

The belief in a separate ego creates a false duality which masks the ultimate unity of all existence. Zen teacher Philip Kapleau: "If we could see beyond the ever-changing forms into the underlying reality, we would realize that fundamentally there is nothing but harmony and unity and that this perfection is no different from the phenomenal world of incessant change and transformation. But our vision is limited and our intuitions, weak." In traditional spiritual teachings the existence of the ego is regarded as an illusion created by dualistic thinking:

According to Buddhism, the notion of an ego, that is, awareness of oneself as a discrete individual, is an illusion. It arises because, misled by our bifurcating intellect into postulating the dualism of "myself" and "not-myself," we are led to think and act as though we were a separate entity confronted by a world external to us. Thus in the unconscious the idea of "I," or selfhood, becomes fixed, and from this arise such thought patterns as "I hate this, I love that; this is mine, that is yours." Nourished by this fodder, the ego-I comes to dominate the personality, attacking whatever threatens its position and grasping at anything which will enlarge its power. Antagonism, greed and alienation, culminating in suffering, are the inevitable consequences of this circular process. (13)

Thoughts, emotions and perceptions exist as a constant stream projected onto the field of awareness. The content of the mind is ever-changing, but the universal ground of Being and the sense of awareness or presence is timeless and changeless:

Q: You cannot possibly say that there are no differences between people. I have my character and capacities just as others have theirs.

A: You live in contraction, thinking of yourself as an individual. Where do the terms 'me' and 'mine' find meaning? When you really look into yourself you

cannot say that the body belongs to you. You are the result of two people and each parent had two parents and so on. All humanity is in you. You are what you absorb. You eat vegetables, fish, meat, and these things are dependent on light, the sun, warmth. There is nothing personal in us. The body is in organic relationship with the universe. It is made of the same elements as everything else. The composition of the elements varies but this variation is almost negligible in human beings. There may be differences in structure and colour but the constitution and functioning are the same in all of us. There is nothing personal in the heart, liver, kidneys, the eyes, ears or skin, nor in the elements which build patterns of behaviour, thinking, reactions, anger, jealousy, competition, comparison, and so on. These are the same emotional states. The body-mind functions in a universal way and the care that has to be taken is the same in all. (14)

Behind the illusion of separate egos lies the timeless background of pure awareness. The Indian sage Ramana Maharshi taught that “the ego functions as the knot between the Self, which is pure Consciousness, and the physical body, which is inert and insentient.”

As long as we imagine ourselves to be separate personalities, one quite apart from another, we cannot grasp reality which is essentially impersonal. First we must know ourselves as witnesses only, dimensionless and timeless centres of observation, and then realize that immense ocean of pure awareness, which is both mind and matter and beyond both.

Q: Whatever I may be in reality, yet I feel myself to be a small and separate person, one amongst many.

A: Your being a person is due to the illusion of space and time; you imagine yourself to be at a certain point occupying a certain volume; your personality is due to your self-identification with the body. Your thoughts and feelings exist in succession, they have their span in time and make you imagine yourself, because of memory, as having duration. In reality time and space exist in you; you do not exist in them. They are modes of perception, but they are not the only ones. Time and space are like words written on paper; the paper is real, the words merely a convention. (15)

Estrangement from the Source

The phenomena of the natural world provide many examples of separation and eventual return to the source of life: “The waters of the ocean evaporate, form clouds which are moved by winds, condense into water, fall as rain and the water rolls down the hill in streams and rivers, until they reach their original source, the ocean, reaching which they are at peace.” In a

similar vein, traditional spiritual teachings speak of a forgetting or turning away from the Self or ground of Being, leading to a sense of alienation and suffering. This idea often appears in the form of an allegory such as the Gilgamesh epic or the legend of the Holy Grail. “We are completely unaware of our true nature because we constantly identify ourselves with our body, our emotions and our thoughts, thus losing sight of our unchanging centre which is pure consciousness and happiness”:

We live in a world of objects which are forever changing. Even our mind is in a state of perpetual change. We have an impression of universal becoming. This is because we have completely forgotten that the Self (the supreme subject) underlies the ego and the world of which it is an unmoving motive power and the ultimate knower. *Sadhana* (spiritual practice) is nothing else but a return to the consciousness of the unmoveable and blissful Self which is the root of ourselves and all objects. This losing sight of the consciousness of Self is described in the Vedantic tradition as a process of identification with objects. It is a kind of forgetfulness, of fascination, of attraction. From this moment onwards, the Self has forgotten itself, paradise is lost and an ego arises, an ego which says: “I do this, I suffer, I think.” By virtue of this identification, what is impersonal becomes mistakenly personal. The search for happiness becomes a desperate search, for the ego – having lost its consciousness of the Self, of perfect bliss – now seeks happiness in finite and passing objects. Sooner or later, however, the ego will be impelled to see the impossibility of finding true happiness in objects and in separate beings. (16)

The major obstacle to self-realization is the habitual identification of the mind and body with the experiences and phenomena of life rather than the underlying source of all existence. “When the mind merges in the Self, the body presents no problems. It remains what it is, an instrument of cognition and action, the tool and the expression of the creative fire within.” Buddhist teachings point to the separation of human beings from the greater dimensions and significance of the One Reality as the fundamental cause of human suffering:

Our estrangement from the real Self is reflected in the unsatisfactory quality of our life – the pain, the existential anxiety, the unfulfillment. The human predicament can be compared to a wheel not running true on its axle and thus grinding. Fragmented and frustrated, we long for wholeness and freedom. We are split off from our true Self in yet another way. Even as we exist in time and space, in a world that is finite, impermanent, and material, *simultaneously* we inhabit a world that is infinite, eternal and formless. Owing to our bifurcating intellect, which divides and separates, we are alienated from our Essential-mind. This Mind cannot be perceived until we are in an awakened state. Thus we are the flawless children of Mother Earth and Father Spirit. Living in our temporary home, the biosphere, with its pain, its beauty, its joy, we are estranged from our permanent abode, the Void. (17)

When ignorance of our real nature is dissolved in the light of understanding, the sense of separation from the Self or Source vanishes. There is really nothing to add to our lives, only self-imposed obstacles to be removed in the realization of our true Being or the Self:

Truly there is no cause for you to be miserable and unhappy. You yourself impose limitation on your true nature of infinite Being and then weep that you are but a finite creature. Hence I say that you are really the infinite, pure Being, the Self-Absolute. You are always that Self and nothing but that Self. Therefore, you can never be really ignorant of the Self; your ignorance is merely a formal ignorance. Know then that true Knowledge does not create a new Being for you; it only removes your “ignorant ignorance.” Bliss is not added to your nature; it is merely revealed as your true and natural state, eternal and imperishable. (18)

Transcending Ego and Uniting with Spirit

Our self-image is based on memory and conditioning and therefore lacks a truly spontaneous, creative and flexible approach to life. “When you live from moment to moment without memory, the real personality has the opportunity to emerge. It is perfectly appropriate to each situation and the moment the situation ends it dissolves back into emptiness.” The ego-based misconception that human beings are separate and distinct entities is conveyed through our subjective perception of the phenomenal world of space and time:

As human beings we see life by means of certain sensory apparatus and because people and objects seem external to us, we experience such misery. Our misery stems from the misconception that we are separate. Certainly it *looks* as though I am separate from other people and from all else in the phenomenal world. This misconception that we are separate creates all the difficulties of human life. Now the truth of the matter is that we’re not separate. We are all expressions or emanations of a central point – call it multi-dimensional energy. We can’t picture this; the central point or energy has no size, no space, no time. I’m speaking metaphorically about what can’t be spoken of in ordinary terms. Following this metaphor, it’s as though this central point radiates out in billions of rays, each thinking that it’s separate from all others. In truth, each of us is always that center, and that center is us. Because everything is connected to that center, we’re all just one thing. (19)

By not identifying with the “I-image” we are free to deal with the experiences of life in a much more natural and effective manner. We then use the personality as a functional tool. “In living free from memory there is spontaneity, and in this spontaneity you are completely adequate to every situation.” Interpersonal relationships provide many opportunities for transcending the ego if one remains in open awareness without reacting automatically to the manifestations of others:

Nonreaction of the ego to others is one of the most effective ways not only of going beyond the ego in yourself but also of dissolving the collective human ego. But you can only be in a state of nonreaction if you can recognize someone's behaviour as coming from the ego, as being an expression of the collective human dysfunction. When you realize it's not personal, there is no longer a compulsion to react as if it were. By not reacting to the ego, you will often be able to bring out the sanity in others, which is the unconditioned consciousness as opposed to the conditioned. At times you may have to take practical steps to protect yourself from deeply unconscious people. This you can do without making them into enemies. Your greatest protection, however, is being conscious . . . Nonreaction is not weakness but strength. Another word for nonreaction is forgiveness. To forgive is to overlook, or rather to look through. You look through the ego to the sanity that is in every human being as his or her essence. (20)

The existence of the sense of a limited ego prevents a direct, all-embracing intuitive awareness of reality. "The egocentric self creates its own world instead of perceiving the world as it really is. The aim of spiritual training is to see into the ultimate unreality of the ego-I and transform the confused and unenlightened mind into enlightenment, or selfless-I." In order to live in a state of open awareness we need to let go of the conditioned ego which binds us to the past.

When we cease to identify with the ego we are open to the light of conscious awareness and presence. "Without a self-image you are really one with life and with the movement of intelligence. Only then can we speak of spontaneous action. We all know moments when pure intelligence, freed from psychological interference, arises, but as soon as we return to an image of being somebody we question this intuition by asking if it is right or wrong, good or bad for us, and so on."

Your real nature is stillness, light, expansion, without center or periphery. It is unconditional being, love. But you do not see it for you are a prisoner of your imagination and of second-hand information. You have enclosed yourself in a universe of concepts and beliefs. The ego is only a function, and to identify with it is a lack of true vision. Thoughts, feelings and actions appear in succession before the witness, leaving their imprint in your brain. Recalling them makes you believe in a continuity which is actually non-existent. But memory is a present thought, thoughts of the past occur in the present. In reality there is only presence, non-dual consciousness. We mistakenly take ourselves to be this or that, but there is only the true "I am" beyond time and space. (21)

The absence of an ego or self-image allows a deeper intelligence to emerge which responds skilfully to the changing situations and challenges of everyday life. Simple awareness and mindfulness is the key to transforming the self-enclosed ego:

To become free of the ego is not really a big job but a very small one. All you need to do is to be aware of your thoughts and emotions – as they happen. This

is not really a “doing,” but an alert “seeing.” In that sense, it is true that there is nothing you can do to become free of the ego. When that shift happens, which is the shift from thinking to awareness, an intelligence far greater than the ego’s cleverness begins to operate in your life. Emotions and even thoughts become depersonalized through awareness. Their impersonal nature is recognized. There is no longer a self in them. They are just human emotions, human thoughts. Your entire personal history, which is ultimately no more than a story, a bundle of thoughts and emotions, becomes of secondary importance and no longer occupies the forefront of your consciousness. It no longer forms the basis for your sense of identity. You are the light of Presence, the awareness that is prior to and deeper than any thoughts or emotions. (22)

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