

The Functional, Managerial Ego

A psychology of awakening, which recognizes the larger realm of egoless awareness, could recognize the functional ego as a transitional mental structure that serves a useful purpose in human development. It is an interim caretaker, a managerial function created by the mind for the purpose of navigating in the world. Initially, this allows children to survive, function, and develop during their early years when they cannot yet fully recognize or draw on the power of their larger being. Ego, then, is a control structure we develop for purposes of survival and protection. The I thinks it is in control, and this belief provides a necessary sense of stability and security for the developing child.

Ego therefore serves a useful developmental purpose as a kind of business manager or agent that learns and masters the ways of the world. The tragedy of the ego, however, is that we start to believe that this manager—this frontal self that interfaces with the world—is who we are. This is like the manager of a business pretending to be the owner. This pretense creates confusion about who we really are.

There is a certain poignancy to this. As an imitation of our true nature, ego is a way of trying to be. If we lack the true strength to deal with difficult circumstances, we try to be strong—by tensing and tightening. Lacking true confidence, we try to get ahead or be on top—by forcing and pushing. Lacking direct knowledge of our value, we try to be lovable—by compromising ourselves, trying to save our parents, or pleasing people. All of these can be useful adaptations in childhood, for they provide some semblance of real inner resources we are not yet fully in touch with.

According to Buddhism, ignorance is the root of suffering. Yet as the Indian sage Sri Aurobindo taught, ignorance is merely incomplete knowledge. In this sense, ego is a form of incomplete knowledge—an attempt to know ourselves as real and capable, rather than deficient. It is incomplete because it operates only on the surface of our nature, as an outer facade, and is not grounded in the true reality of our being. This is a poignant situation because the ego, the managerial self, is trying hard to do the right thing, without ever really succeeding.

Therefore criticizing the ego is like condemning a child for not being an adult. Our personality is simply a stage on the path. Instead of indulging in ego-bashing, a more helpful approach is to appreciate how ego tries its best and have some compassion for its ultimate failure.

Indeed, if we define ego strength as the capacity to function effectively in the world, without being debilitated by inner conflict, certainly no Eastern teacher would have any argument with that. The Buddhist notion of egolessness is not meant to counteract ego strength in that sense. Practically speaking, most spiritual teachers would agree that a grounded sense of confidence is an important important basis for spiritual practice, which aims at letting go of self-fixation altogether.

Yet at some point in adult development, we may start to recognize that ego's effortful striving does not really work. We discover the painful truth: the Wizard of Oz who's pretending to control things behind the scenes has no real power to deliver the goods—the mastery or satisfaction it claims to be capable of achieving. As the Russian teacher Gurdjieff used to say, I cannot do anything. Just as digestion and the blood's circulation happen on their own, so genuine action, decision, understanding, and feeling arise, in truth, from a larger grace and intelligence that lies outside the ego's grasp. At some point in our development, it is time to let go of the fabricated control structure that once served us so well.

So from a larger spiritual perspective, the central ego-self around which most people's lives revolve is at best an early stage of development, rather than an ultimate, indispensable organizing organizing principle of

consciousness. To reify the ego as a necessary, enduring structure of the psyche—as Western psychology does—only solidifies its central position in our lives and impedes our capacity to move beyond it. If the small managerial self runs our life, this is not because ego is indispensable but because we have not found a larger principle to guide us. Ego is a pretender to the throne; it sits in the seat of the real sovereign, which is our true nature, our larger being.

Once we no longer believe in ego as a permanent structure necessary for the balanced functioning of the psyche or for efficient action in the world, we can start to recognize how capacities for balance, harmony, integration, power, and skillful action are resources inherent in our larger nature. As these larger capacities of being are uncovered, they can take over functions that the controlling ego-self formerly managed. Then it becomes possible to function in the world in a way that will not cut us off from our being.

Welwood, John. *Toward a Psychology of Awakening* (p. 39). Shambhala. Kindle Edition.