

# Radikal Freedom - Yoga as realisation



## Ego: Why We Need It!

Spiritual and psychological teachings including yoga all talk of ego.

It is really useful to develop an understanding of ego since so much is spoken of it, and if we are truly on a developmental journey through yoga then having this map of ego helps us understand both the practices and our selves.

One teacher I heard said, “Ego is the part of you that makes you do bad things”.

If we are seeking movement into greater spiritual awareness, we need a better understanding of ego than this. Ego is also us doing things that we think or believe are good; because we then look good and can believe our ‘selves’ to be good!

Ego can conversely manifest as us behaving in a manner of subservience, with low ‘self’-esteem, in a victim role, ‘self’ harming and in many ways that are not to do with aggrandisement or apparent ego inflation.

Yogic teachings use the words Asmita, Ahamkara, Abhinivesha and Avidya (the four A’s) to describe the functions of the Ego.

The sage Patanjali author of the Yoga Sutras states that Asmita and Abhinivesha are two of the main causes of our experience of difficulty in the world.

Asmita is the I-feeling of I –amness, it is that part of us that refers everything back to ourselves, me, mine, I, and is most closely what we in western-think would consider as ego.

Abhinivesha is the deep, embodied, fear of dying; of this I-amness being terminated, this is the drive of egoic self-preservation.

From this drive and from our experience of pain and pleasure arise two other main motivations; one is attachment, grasping onto ‘good’ feelings or things, seeking to preserve them as our experience and thus being unable to flow with change.

The second is aversion, the drive to move away from ‘bad’ feelings or experiences.

The underlying cause of these aspects of being, aspects that keep us stuck in a limited view of who we are, is Avidya.

Avidya means ignorance of who we really are.

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We ignorantly confuse our true identity of joyful, pure, loving, blissful, totally wise beingness with the limited beliefs of who we are, including physical bodily patterns, mental ideas and opinions and emotional patterns.

All spiritual teachings tell us that the small and limited aspect of being called 'self' or ego is only concerned for it's own personal survival, wellbeing and feeling good, this is an egoic lifestyle.

All spiritual teachings also view a larger more expansive, freer and truer way of being which is variously termed Buddhanature, Atman, Brahman, Purusha or Self and Pure Consciousness.

Ahamkara is a term used by the Samkhyan philosophical school which denotes the movement from the great principle which is both supreme intelligence and luminosity, into individuation, the beginning of the separation into subject 'I' and object it or you.

Ego is then concretisation of the feeling of 'I' into thinking, feeling, acting, believing, behaving and experiencing.

In psych-analytic thinking this ego construct is also seen as the part of the mind that is responsible for interpreting reality, mediating between the inner and outer worlds and for the creation of a sense of 'self'.

This sense of 'self', can include quite difficult or 'self' harming behaviours, as these also constitute a sense of 'self', an identity rooted in feeling and behaviour.

When we are born into the world, if we are fortunate enough to have good-enough parenting, then we successfully learn in the first three years of life that we are emotionally and physically separate, and in the following five years that we are cognitively separate and can have our 'own' ideas and dreams. As we flow through this process, we create the 'I', the sense of 'self' as we grow and individuate, hopefully growing reasonably successfully into a being capable of moving without too much difficulty through the world.

The ego is the first map we construct of our-'selves', a map that enables us to reference the things that are being thought, felt and experienced inside of us (as us) with the outside world of other beings and things. Ego then is a natural and essential function of growing up.

We begin to concretise this map, which becomes deeply embodied in physical structure, feeling and thinking and then confuse it for who we truly are!

To construct the map or ego, we also had to reject many thoughts, many feelings and many experiences (even though we thought, felt and experienced them!) as not us. "I am not like that", "I don't do that", "other people do that", "bad people do that, not me" and so we create a shadow persona, the counterpoint to the ego. The shadow becomes the map of who we believe we are not, even though these feelings, thoughts and experiences live in us.

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This shadow becomes visible when we have a deep emotional issue with other people who reflect our shadow persona and can be externalised as a projection out onto others as demonic energy.

To begin the journey of deeper Yoga, the spiritual journey we actually need as a prior requirement a strong, healthy ego.

To successfully process and reintegrate our own demonic states we need a very solid sense of 'self' to handle this work. If we are to process and resolve the unresolved emotional issues of our life and completely release any false idea of a limited identity as we move from the caterpillar of the ego to the butterfly of our true deeper nature, then as the initial platform for this journey we need a healthy caterpillar, a strong, healthy, functional ego.

One Vedic priest said to me;

“When life is perfect and all is beautiful, yet somehow there is a sense of more, this is the beginning of the spiritual journey”

A Buddhist teacher, Khyentse Norbu, said;

“You can keep your ego, it will help you get around, as long as you know who is driving? Are you driving or is it driving you?”

Some teachings talk of ego-ectomy or killing the ego, this may actually be unhelpful, why? Because who will kill the ego but the ego, this is patently not possible.

What can arise from such teaching is a pseudo-spiritual game of inner conflict and pretence as we seek and pretend to be non-egoic. Maybe we play the game of being better or more spiritual than others because we 'do' Yoga or meditation, or don't eat meat or whatever it is we do. This wont work and is in many ways a sign of divided and unhealthy ego.

So exactly what is a healthy ego?

A strong healthy ego allows us to look what is, at what actually exists within the realms of all our senses, sight, hearing, smell, taste, touch, thinking-feeling and internal sensation, without blinking, without closing our eyes, without running away either internally to some fantasy land or externally to some source of comfort.

Ego strength allows us to be with what is, without falling into superstitious or magical thinking. Magical thinking is a low stage of development of consciousness and involves the childish reasoning;

“If I want it I should have it”

or perhaps;

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“Thinking it will make it real, if I think it hard enough”

Or “If I close my eyes and count to ten it will go away”

And, again translated into a pseudo-spiritual practice that actually misuses the spiritual tools, we might find;

“If I go to ‘temple’ often enough, say some special words lots of times (or any other ritual), then I can have it!”

This is not the recipe for spiritual growth and what is required first is the development of the healthy ego that can face reality.

A healthy ego will see what is presented without being overwhelmed, without feeling threatened by it or responding with an inappropriate stress reaction.

With good enough ego-strength we are able to handle frustration, stress, difficulty and the unpleasant aspects of the world or of life in general. We remain capable of handling these difficulties with our internal and external senses open, alert and operational.

Dropping into the variety of ego defence patterns including denial, “it’s not happening” or “I’m not really like this”, and defensive patterns of suppression or repression where we push the thoughts or feelings deep into the mind or body and maybe even somaticise them as disease. Defensive patterns of intellectualising, creating some theory or meaning that actually is only a way of denying the feeling states that are actually happening in us. Fantasising is another defence pattern, creating internal mythologies where we are good, or heroic, or where some saviour comes to our rescue.

All of these defensive strategies where we desperately seek to protect our identity as the fragile egoic map or ‘self’, are ways of denying that what we are actually experiencing of our ‘selves’ in relationship to an internal or external experience is untrue.

Accepting what is true, what is clearly presented to all our internal and external senses is ego-strength.

Keeping these senses open in clear focused states of essential well-being and remaining with a basic feeling of safety and security. This is basic ego-health, which is the stepping-stone into spiritual practice; this is our caterpillar state.

This strength enables us to see, accept, embrace and ultimately love our inner demon states and thus heal them. This is the beginning of the spiritual journey.

Christopher Gladwell