

Ego

Ram (James Swartz)

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There are three definitions of the word “ego.”

The first is that which identifies with any activity. It is called the “doer,” and its relationship to the self and enlightenment is explained in detail in the in Chapter VII of my book *How to Attain Enlightenment* and in the section above entitled “*Karma, the Doer.*”

The second definition is embodied consciousness, a conscious being with a body. Animals, insects, microbes and humans are embodied beings. You can even make a case that plants are embodied beings. Embodied beings are sometimes conceived as rays or emanations of formless consciousness, man cast in the image of God, and they seem to be separate from their source, consciousness. They seem to be separate if they are viewed from the point of view of their bodies, but viewed from the self’s point of view they are non-separate. They do not stand in the way of consciousness, because they are consciousness in form, just as waves do not stand in the way of the ocean. Humans are the only egos that think, although certain members of the animal kingdom seem to be evolving the capacity to think.

All embodied beings are the self, but an embodied human being can be enlightened or unenlightened. An enlightened being is one that knows, appearances to the contrary notwithstanding, that it is not separate from consciousness, assuming as always that this knowledge has neutralized its binding likes and dislikes. An unenlightened being is someone who takes the appearance of separation to be real and is at the mercy of his or her binding likes and dislikes.

The third definition of ego, the I-notion, relates exclusively to human beings because they are the only embodied beings that think. Dogs do not know they are dogs. They do not think they are better or worse than other dogs or any other embodied beings. Human beings, on the other hand, entertain all sorts of ideas about who they are. I am rich, poor, gay, straight, intelligent, stupid, good, bad, Republican, Democrat, etc. The list of identities that humans are capable of concocting is virtually limitless. All these identities are limited and fall under two categories: “I am a knower” or “I am a doer/enjoyer.” The doer is someone who identifies with an activity and thinks it is solely responsible for its actions, gross and subtle. The doer is a doer for the sake of the results of its actions which it wishes to enjoy. When a doer enjoys the result of its actions, it becomes an enjoyer. The knower is the one who identifies with what it experiences and knows.

Aside from the fact that there is no evidence that such an I exists, the destruction of the notion that the I is limited is a restricted formulation of enlightenment because the absence of a limited identity does not equal enlightenment. If it did, plants and animals, even microbes, would be enlightened. And you would be enlightened in deep sleep because you are not an ego there. For enlightenment you need the hard and fast knowledge of who you are in the waking state. If you conflate ego death with enlightenment, you may very well find yourself a void. The life of a void is not particularly pleasant.

Assuming there is an ego that is standing in the way of enlightenment, the ego death teaching is

still unworkable because it asks the ego to kill itself. If the ego is the embodied being, it would only kill itself if it thought that it would derive a benefit, but most egos are smart enough to realize that if they do not exist, no benefits will accrue.

Also, if ego is the I-notion, it cannot kill itself, because it is not conscious. So on both counts the idea comes up short. This leaves the Hollywood ending: the ego remains, gets the permanent enlightenment experience and enjoys endless experiential bliss.

In actuality, enlightenment is freedom from the I-notion, not the embodied being. The embodied being is actually limitless consciousness with an incorrect understanding of its nature. For it to free itself from erroneous self-notions, it should expose itself to the means of self-knowledge and contemplate the teachings dispassionately. The death of the I-notion happens as a result of self-knowledge, not something you do.

What is self-knowledge with reference to the ego? It is the knowledge that the embodied being is me but I am not the embodied being. This is tantamount to ego death because it shifts the ego from the center of consciousness to the periphery where it belongs, not that consciousness has a periphery. Self-knowledge is the best of both worlds, not that there are two worlds, as it allows you to live freely as embodied consciousness without suffering the results of actions.

Pride, the final definition of ego, does not relate directly to the question of enlightenment but bears mention nonetheless. Pride is willful ignorance of the fact that everything you take to be yours is actually borrowed from the world. If you are proud of your good looks, you need to realize that you had nothing to do with it. If you have a particularly brilliant mind, it was not created by you. If you are proud because you accomplished something, it was only because the world provided the opportunity. Pride is a problem for seekers because it supports the ego's notion of specialness, uniqueness and duality. Its absence, however, is not enlightenment.