

Transcending Ego

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2015-02-27

Source: <http://www.shiningworld.com/site/satsang/read/2048>

Ernesto: I have a couple more questions about ego:

1. What does Vedanta say about transcending ego?

Ted: In order to properly answer this question, we need to be clear on what we're talking about. What exactly is the ego?

Vedanta has three basic concepts regarding the ego.

The first is *jiva*. Simply enough, a *jiva* is an embodied being with the capacity for sentience. All plants, animals and human beings are *jivas*. Rocks, cars and computers are not *jivas*.

The second is *ahamkara*. The *ahamkara* is not actually an entity unto itself but rather is a "component" of the subtle body (i.e. the mind, or *antahkarana*, the "inner instrument"). Even more precisely, the *ahamkara* is a part of the intellect, but to reiterate the point, it is not a "thing." It is not the independently volitional entity it is often conceived to be in the "spiritual" world. In a general sense, the *ahamkara* is simply the notion that I am a separate individual entity and the consequent belief that I am a doer and an enjoyer/experiencer. Figuratively speaking, it is the one who claims responsibility for all the decisions the intellect makes and all the actions the mind and body take. In more specific terms, the *ahamkara* is the plethora of ideas the apparent individual harbors about himself or herself, such as, "I am a male or female; I am black, white, yellow, red; I am fat, skinny, healthy, sick, young, old, smart, dumb, a conservative, a liberal, artistic, business-minded, spontaneous, pragmatic, neat, messy, a punker, a tweaker, a stoner, a Goth, straightedge, a skinhead, a biker, a queen." As my teacher says, the world is a supermarket of identities. And the ego is that aspect of the apparent person that identifies with these identities and defines itself in terms of them.

The third is *abhimanam*. We might say that *abhimanam* is an extension of *ahamkara*. It is the sense of ownership, the idea "This is mine; this belongs to me." It is the definition of ego that is closest in meaning to the common Western definition of ego as "self-importance" or "conceit." Though it does not necessarily connote an attitude of arrogance, *abhimanam* does suggest a feeling of pride associated with one's possession of particular objects, be they tangible items, physical characteristics and/or skills, mental acuity and/or creativity or personal experiences and/or accomplishments.

In all three cases, there is a sense of a personal identity, a sense of being an "I" who is separate from and different than other "I"s. In Vedantic terms, this sense of separation is the essence of egoism.

To answer your question then, Vedanta says that it is the sense of separation that needs to be transcended, not the sense of egoism per se. In other words, while the association with the mind-body-sense complex will necessarily continue, one needs to cease identifying oneself in terms of it. One needs to understand that despite appearances to the contrary, all forms are essentially

nothing other than awareness, the singular “substanceless substance” that is the *adhishtanam*, the substratum, supporting the entire manifestation

The transcendence of the ego is entirely a matter of understanding.

The *jiva* is here to stay as long as the physical body holds out. Obviously, as long as the apparent individual is alive he is going to need a body in order to navigate his way through the apparent reality and exhaust his *prarabdha karma*, the *karma* slated to express within the context of that particular *jiva*'s incarnation that has already been set in motion. So we can't very well give up our physical vehicle.

The *ahamkara* is necessary in order to afford the apparent individual the ability to function as a discrete entity within the dualistic apparent reality. If the apparent individual weren't equipped with the sense duality, he wouldn't even be able to find the doorway through which to leave his house in the morning, much less be able to drive a car or take care of business at his place of employment. And if he weren't able to tell himself apart from other entities, he wouldn't even know what mouth he was supposed to feed when he felt hungry, much less be able to play with his dog or interact with his friends and family. Moreover, you need a highly-refined intellect and healthy sense of “I” in order to engage in effective self-inquiry and make the discrimination between the self and the “not-self” that facilitates the assimilation of self-knowledge and the “attainment” of ultimate inner freedom. Ironically, you need the ability to effectively operate the instrument of the apparent individual person in order to eradicate your identification with it.

All of which brings us to your second question...

Ernesto: 2. Is transcending ego the same as ego death?

~ Best regards, Ernesto

Ted: No.

Per the previous explanation, the ego, one's sense of being an apparent individual person, is not actually the problem. Suffering only ensues from the circumstances of one's life when one believes that the apparent person is both real and one's true identity. When you understand that you are whole, complete, perfect, pure, limitless, attributeless awareness and that as such no apparent object or experience can enhance, diminish or otherwise affect your essential nature in any way or to any degree whatsoever, then you are free. Through the instrument of the mind-body-sense mechanism that constitutes the apparent individual person you seem to be, you will still encounter the ups and downs that characterize the drama of life within the context of the apparent dualistic reality. However, while the experience of pain and pleasure persists, suffering ceases once and for all.

One's association with the mind-body-sense complex therefore not need and, for that matter should not, be eradicated – self-realization, after all, does not equate with dissociative identity disorder or death – but one's identification with it should be negated through the assimilation of self-knowledge.