

Sophisticated Ego

Having trouble deflating that smart, sweet-talking ego of yours? Try embracing it instead. When it's as big as possible, you can include everything in your sense of self.

By Sally Kempton

Ego, a friend of mine likes to say, is the devil. She talks about ego the way fundamentalists talk about sin, and she blames it for all the qualities she dislikes in herself—envy, the burning need to get credit for every favor she does, and the fear that her boyfriend doesn't love her as much as he loved his ex. But no matter how hard she fights it, with long hours of meditation or purifying diets, it stubbornly refuses to disappear. And she has begun to see that fighting the ego is like trying to outrun her own shadow—the more she tries to escape it, the more it sticks to her.

It's a paradox yogis have been grappling with for eons: The ego, which *loves* any form of self-improvement, is especially eager to take on projects for getting rid of itself. It will earnestly set itself up to get bashed, and then pop up like a piece of half-toasted bread, as if to say, "Look at me, haven't I practically disappeared?"

In fact, a really sophisticated ego is a master at disguising itself. It may show up as your feeling of injustice or as the smooth voice of yogic detachment telling you there's no point in indulging a friend's emotional neediness. The ego can even pretend it's the inner witness and watch itself endlessly while smugly congratulating itself on having escaped its own traps.

All these tricks make it challenging to address what you may think is your ego problem. Moreover, from the ultimate point of view, the ego doesn't actually exist. Buddhist and Vedantic teachers are fond of saying that the ego is like the blue of the sky, or the apparent puddle in the middle of a desert-dry highway. It's an optical illusion, a simple mistake in the way we identify ourselves. That's why fighting your ego is like boxing with your reflection in the mirror, or trying to rid yourself of something you don't have. Now that neurobiologists seem to have reduced the sense of I-ness to a couple of brain chemicals, the ego looks more than ever to be a kind of involuntary mechanism, something beyond our personal control, just like the reflex that makes us go on breathing when we sleep.

But even though the ego may ultimately be illusory, in the world of our daily lives it performs important functions. The yogic texts define ego somewhat differently than Western psychology does, but they agree with Western psychologists that one of the ego's tasks is to keep our boundaries as individuals. In Sanskrit, the word for ego is *ahamkara*, which means "the I maker." Ego differentiates among the mass of sensations that come your way and tells you that a particular experience belongs to the energy bundle you call "me." When a truck comes hurtling down the street, ego tells you that it's "you" who should get out of the way. Ego also collects your experiences, like the time you stood up in fifth-grade assembly to sing a solo of "A Very Precious Love" and got booed. Then, the ego will compare a current moment to what happened in the past, so the next time you're tempted to sing a love song in front of a bunch of 10-year-olds, something will tell you to forget it. This is ego's most basic job.

Unfortunately, ego likes to extend its portfolio. Its memory function, for example, can grab on to bad experiences and turn them into a negative feedback loop—so painful memories get lodged inside you and become crippling blocks in your body and brain. That's part of the downside of ego: the ego as "false identification."