

Ego

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The word “ego” unfortunately has two very different meanings, and it’s easy to get the two of them confused. To begin with, there’s the nasty ego, the ego that by definition is bad. A person who has a very strong ego of this sort is one who wants everything done his or her way, who doesn’t really care about other people’s opinions, who thinks very highly of his or her own opinions, and who puts his or her needs ahead of everybody else’s. That kind of ego is unhealthy and causes a lot of misery for a lot of people.

The other sense of ego, though, is the ego who’s is the member of the inner committee who tries to negotiate between your sense of what you should do and your sense of what you want to do—so that the shoulds don’t get too overpowering, and your wants don’t obliterate your sense of right and wrong. In other words, you don’t get so repressed that you have no will of your own, but you don’t want your will to operate without any rules. This sense of ego, when it’s strong, is healthy. In fact, it needs to be strong if you’re going to survive.

But in addition to being strong, it needs to be strategic, for its role as a negotiator requires a lot of skill.

Psychologists have traced five skills that are essential for a healthy ego to negotiate well, and they all have their parallels in the Buddha’s teaching.

There’s a misconception that the Buddha taught us to have no self or no ego or that we’re supposed to suppress our ego. But a person without a good ability to negotiate between wants and shoulds is really at the mercy of just about anything.

There was a famous Buddhist teacher who used to talk about the how we should overthrow the bureaucracy of the ego. The idea sounded attractive, but then you saw how he used it with his students: He was stripping them of their sense of what’s really right and wrong so that he could take advantage of them.

In the same way, sometimes the shoulds that other people impose on you take over, without your asking, “Are

these ideas really good for me?” And, of course, your wants can take over too, without any regard for right or wrong or consequences.

That’s one of the first things that a healthy ego has to deal with: the consequences of actions. It has to be able to look forward into the future, seeing that if you act on this or think this way, what’s going to happen down the line.

This ability psychologists call anticipation. In the Buddha’s teachings it’s called heedfulness: realizing that your actions really do make a difference, and that what may seem like an innocent train of thought because no one else is involved, really can have consequences that harm you in the future and harm other people too. So a healthy ego is able to foresee the consequences and take them seriously. If you have a healthy ego, you can get your desires to listen to you. But that requires more than just anticipation.

You also have to be able to sublimate—in other words, find an alternative pleasure. If it’s something you like to do that’s harmful, what can you do instead that you *want* to do, that you find pleasurable but wouldn’t cause harm?

This is one of the reasons why we meditate: It’s the Buddhist strategy for sublimation, to give the mind a sense of wellbeing that’s blameless, that’s reliable. In the beginning, it’s not all that reliable, but over time you can turn it into a skill. Then, once it’s a skill, you can tap into it whenever you need it. When you think about the ease and wellbeing that come from just being able to breathe skillfully, breathe with awareness, fill your body with a sense of wellbeing, you can take advantage of the potential of that sense of wellbeing and learn how to use the breath to move it along. In other words, let it develop. Give it some space. You can then use this pleasure to negotiate with your desires that want to do something unskillful, and you can defuse them by feeding the mind with an immediate and palpable sense of wellbeing.

Another negotiating skill is altruism, when you remind yourself that your wellbeing can’t depend on the suffering of other people. You have to take their wellbeing into consideration as well if you want your wellbeing to last. This of course, in Buddhist terms, is compassion.

There’s an interesting series of stories in the Canon

where the Buddha's talking to some young boys. In one case they're beating a snake with a stick, and in another case they're fishing. In both cases, he asks them, "Do you want happiness in your life?" And they say, "Yes, of course." And he replies, "Well, how can you find happiness when you're making other beings suffer? If you really want happiness, let them be happy too."

What's ironic is that he gives the same teaching to a king: King Pasenadi, who was very much like a little boy in a lot of ways, very impulsive. There's that great scene where he's in the palace with his queen, Mallika. And he turns to her in a tender moment and says, "Is there anyone you love more than yourself?" You know what he's thinking. He wants her to say "Yes, Your Majesty, I love you more than I love myself." And then the violins will swell. But the Pali Canon doesn't have violins in the background. Instead, she says "No. There's nobody I love more than myself. And how about you?" And the king's forced to be honest: There's nobody he loves more than himself.

So he goes down from the palace to see the Buddha and asks him about this. And the Buddha says, "Yes, you can go the whole world over and you'd never find anybody who loves you more than they love themselves. You'd never find anybody that you love more than you love yourself." That sounds like a dog-eat-dog world, but the Buddha's comment is, "Because of this, never harm anyone." In other words, if your wellbeing depends on their suffering, one, it's not fair, and two, it's not wise. It's not going to last very long. So when you find that you have certain desires that are going to harm other people, you've got to remind yourself you can't let your wellbeing depend on their harm.

This is another way of negotiating with your desires—and also with some of the shoulds that are imposed on you by the world, because many of us grew up with all kinds of weird ideas of what we have to do or what should be done, and they require a lot of suffering on somebody's part. So it's good to be able to reflect on that and remind yourself that there must be a better way to act.

One of the most blatant examples we see are people who were taught that they had to sacrifice living beings in order to gain happiness. But there are a lot more subtle

ways in which we do that: in turning a blind eye and deaf ear to the beings we harm as we scramble to find happiness. So we have to learn how to negotiate, both with that warped sense of what you should do and with the desires that are basically warped as well.

Another way of negotiating is to use suppression. Now this is not repression. Repression is when you deny that you have a certain desire even though it's there. Suppression is when you admit that it's there, but you have to say No. Again, you have to have some skill in saying No. This is where the sense of altruism—i.e., compassion—comes in, for example, when you realize that “It would help other people if I resisted this impulse, it would help me if I resisted this impulse.” Because, after all, compassion is not just for others, it's also for yourself. That's where compassion and heedfulness come together.

And finally: a sense of humor. If you can learn how to laugh at some of your defilements, it takes a lot of their power away. The Canon doesn't talk a lot about humor, but there's a lot of it there. I certainly noticed with the forest ajaans that they had really good senses of humor. And what this implies is the ability to step back and not take all your desires so seriously, to realize that you have some pretty wrongheaded and basically stupid notions of what's going to lead to happiness. If you can pull out from them and take a realistic look and see the humor in the situation, you realize that this is the human condition. It's both funny and sad.

When you study history, you have to have a strong sense of irony, because you see people doing things to create what they want very much and of course they end up creating precisely the things they don't want as a result. On the one hand you can see that as sad and on the other hand you can see that it's pretty dumb. Your sense of irony helps you see these things as if from above. As they said in Ancient Greece, the gods laugh. The gods are up there in heaven looking at human beings and they get to laugh at our foibles. Well, you become a god-like person when you can step back and look at your own foibles and laugh at them as well.

So all these are negotiating strategies. This is what a healthy ego means: It's a function, it's not a thing in the

mind. It's a range of skills that you need to develop in order to negotiate all the different members of the committee inside and all the voices coming in from outside. Because if this kind of ego is not healthy then, as I said, you're prey to all kinds of stuff, both from people outside and from your strange ideas of what you should and shouldn't do inside, along with your strange ideas of what you *want* to do. A lot of the wisdom of the ego comes down to seeing that if you really look at what you want to do and look at the consequences, look at the whole story, you realize it's not something you want.

So how do you say No? Start with this ability to sublimate, to find healthy, harmless pleasures. These pleasures come not only from concentration but also from understanding, from virtue, from generosity, the pleasure that comes from doing something noble with your life. You want to nurture this sense of pleasure and a sensitivity to this kind of pleasure, because when we talk about happiness it's not just about people running around smiling all the time and being kind of dumb and happy. Whatever gives you real satisfaction in life: You want it to be harmless, you want it to be true, you want it to be reliable. And there's a nobility in finding a happiness that's harmless, makes use of your capabilities, and there's a pleasure in that nobility.

So you really can act on your compassion. It's not just an idea. It's actually something that you use to determine how you act, how you speak, how you think.

And you want your heedfulness to be working together with your compassion. After all, that's how heedfulness works: Are you really concerned for your wellbeing? Do you really want not to suffer? Do you have compassion for yourself? Okay, be heedful. Learn how to say No to your unskillful desires and your unskillful ideas of what you should and shouldn't do. Learn how to step back from them and regard them with some humor.

These functions all come together. And they're all useful as you meditate. You'll find thoughts coming up and getting obsessive. You need to be able to step back from the loop of the obsession. And these healthy ego functions are precisely the tools that you need to do that.

If you've seen people who are good at negotiating, you

realize they need to have a sense of humor, they need to have compassion for the people they're working with, they need to offer substitute pleasures for the things they're asking other people to give up. Well, have the same sense of humor and compassion for yourself, use the same strategies with yourself, because the good effects will spread all around.

And when you have the healthy kind of ego, then the bad kind of ego gets declawed, defanged and is no longer such a problem.