

Moving Beyond Ego

Question: What is it that makes people forget their true spiritual nature?

Answer: Ego, also known as limited self-identification

When the Indian scriptures tell you to “get rid of your ego,” they aren’t referring to ego in terms of Freudian theory, or to the common usage of the word for someone who is overly proud or arrogant. In spiritual circles, the word *ego* is commonly used as a translation of the Sanskrit word, *ahamkara*, which comes from two roots:

- *Aham* means, “I am.”
- *Kara* is an action verb, which can be translated as “to make.”

Your *ahamkara* is the *I-maker*. It makes the idea that “I am, and I am separate.” *Ahamkara* is the misconception that you are an object — disconnected from everything and everybody else — and that you have to always look out for yourself in this world. This limited ego makes bad decisions and becomes the distorting force in a person’s life. This is the ego that spiritual practices and efforts chop away to reveal your hidden gems.

Ego isn’t only the part of you that thinks you’re better than anyone else, but also the part of you that thinks you’re worse or less than another person. It’s not the good or bad feelings that decide whether your experience is being tainted by ego; rather ego is the false and limited view of yourself that’s creating those good or bad feelings.

Spirituality in Action

To explore what some of your limited views of yourself may be, listen to how you talk to yourself and others about yourself. How do you describe yourself? Do you focus on your talents, gifts, and contributions to life, or on your challenges, human frailties, and other negative descriptions? Do you judge and compare yourself to others? Do you feel burdened by your responsibilities, accomplishments, and failures, or do you remember to identify with the flowing water of spirit that is expressing as the various shapes of your life?

Praising yourself doesn’t necessarily mean that you have a big ego — in fact, you may simply be free enough from ego that you gratefully appreciate your individual gifts without the limited self-identification of ego. Alternatively, you may appear to be very humble but still have large pockets of hidden ego. Because ego can be so tricky and difficult to discern, some choose to study under spiritual teachers and guides who have an elevated vision that allows them to see where your ego buttons are and how best to heal them.

Be Careful

In spiritual circles, you'll be sure to find many who will be all too happy to take on the role of "busting your ego," such as those I call the "humility police." Some of these people may be anointed, while others are simply annoying.

Chapter 5 gives you helpful guidance on how to know who and what to follow and listen to as you travel on your spiritual path.

A Sufi poet expressed the ego's condition very well, explaining that "when worldly people don't get something, they are restless; and when they do get it, they become arrogant."

Isn't this the truth? Sometimes good fortune can be transmuted into harmful ego, which is quite a shame. Conversely, difficult times can sometimes push you out of the ego's complacency and limited self-importance, and into something greater.

Be Careful

When you feel an ego-based impulse stirring, such as when people are praising or challenging you, don't fall for the temptation to get swept away by their flattering or insulting opinions. Stop the sense of limited identification before it starts. It may feel good at first to feel special, like a big shot, or even righteously indignant, but those fleeting sensations aren't worth the cost!

Are you really God?

When the great spiritual masters declare that "You are God," they're communicating a truth discovered in the depths of contemplation — in that innermost sanctum of spiritual consciousness and soul communion.

However, if you have an incomplete understanding and image of who you are and what God is, then this statement doesn't really make sense.

After all, if you were God, things would look a heck of a lot different around your world than they do now, right?

Well, not necessarily. You see, it's not the "little you" who is worried about getting to work on time that is Lord and Master over all creation. It is the great, wise you who sees beyond outer appearances and into the heart of life — the YOU that exists within you.

Spirituality in Action

Breaking free from egocentric, limited identifications is the key to spiritual growth. Here are two basic approaches to moving beyond ego:

- **Shrinking your ego:** This approach calls for you to file down all the desires and impulses that arise from wrong identification of yourself as a limited human rather than a divine being. While working to shrink your ego, you become vigilant over any thoughts or desires that come up and may even put yourself into situations that challenge you to let go of limited ego comforts. Saints and sages of many traditions have willingly undergone austerities such as fasting and days of unending prayer to subdue their ego-based instincts and tendencies.
- **Expanding your ego:** With this approach, if someone gives you a huge compliment, you receive it, perhaps agree with it, and continue to move forward without having your ego get puffed up in a limited way that would make you act arrogant or egotistical. Rather, your ego's identification begins to grow and grow, getting bigger and bigger as you realize that you are great and divine — and so is everyone else! In this awareness, the small ego sense bursts into a million fragrant rose petals of universal grace, as you begin to see supreme oneness everywhere.