

How to Lose Our Ego and Find Compassion?

Sri Krishna says in the Bhagavadgita: ‘He who is not hateful towards any creature, who is friendly and compassionate, who has no idea of “mine” and the idea of egoism, who is the same under sorrow and happiness, who is forgiving (is dear to Me).’¹

What does this verse suggest? Sri Krishna indicates that one can be truly friendly and compassionate only when one gives up egotism and the *idea of mine*, the offshoot of ego. The instruction is clear: the lesser the ego, the more of the feeling of compassion fills up our mind. Ego is antagonistic to compassion. It is a lifetime work to shed our ego and develop compassion. The questions before us now are: *What is ego? Why is it evil?*

The Idea of Ego according to Vedanta and Yoga

According to classical Vedanta, *ahamkāra* or the ego is only one of the mental states, while the real ‘I’ or Self is the witness of all mental modifications. The Self never involves itself in any of the changes found in the mind. Sri Shankaracharya says: ‘The inner organ (*antahkaraṇa*) is called *manas*, *buddhi*, ego, or *chitta*, according to their respective functions: *manas*, from its considering the pros and cons of a thing; *buddhi*, from its property of determining the truth of objects; the ego, from its identification with this body as one’s own self; and *chitta*, from its function of seeking for pleasurable objects.’²

It is evident from the above that *ahamkāra*, the ego, is a false idea born out of *avidyā* or ignorance about the Self, which is by nature *Sat-Chit-Ānanda* (Existence-Knowledge-Bliss). This is an example of *adhyāsa* or superimposition, in which the idea of *Ātman* (Self) is superimposed on the *anātman* or non-Self, and the mind, a *non-Self*, is mistaken to be the *Self*. This wrong idea of Self, through which one fails to distinguish oneself from the mind is called *ahamkāra* or ego. It is this mental state that acts as the ‘I’ in all our empirical activities.

Swami Vivekananda says that the ‘ego’ like its correlative ‘non-ego’, is a product of the body-mind complex.³ The organs of the senses are divided into organs of action and organs of perception.

Then there is the mind itself. It is like a smooth lake which when struck, say by a stone, vibrates. The vibrations gather together and react on the stone, and all through the lake they will spread and be felt. The mind is like the lake; it is constantly being set in vibrations, which leave an impression on the mind; and the idea of the Ego, or personal self, the ‘I’, is the result of these impressions. *This ‘I’ therefore is only the very rapid transmission of force and is in itself no reality.*⁴ (Italics added for emphasis)

Yoga of Patanjali also asserts that ego is the direct result of *avidyā*, a false understanding of our Self. This ignorance is the breeding ground of all evils including ego, attachment, hatred, and fear.⁵ According to Yoga, egoism is the identification of the seer with the instrument of seeing.⁶ Swamiji explains that the seer is really the Self, the pure one, the ever holy, the infinite, the immortal. This is the Self of man. The instruments are the mind and the sense organs. The identification of the Self with the instruments is what is called the ignorance of egoism. Swamiji says:

We say, ‘I am the mind’, ‘I am thought’, ‘I am angry’, or ‘I am happy’. How can we be angry and how can we hate? We should identify ourselves with the Self that cannot change. If It is unchangeable, how can It be one moment happy, and one moment unhappy? It is formless, infinite, omnipresent. What can change It? It is beyond all law. What can affect it? Nothing in the universe can produce an effect on It. Yet through ignorance, we identify ourselves with the mind-stuff, and think we feel pleasure or pain.⁷

Adverse Effects of the Ego

There are three shades of meaning to the term ‘ego’: 1. Empirical, 2. Ethical, and 3. Spiritual. Empirically, ego is that ‘sense of I’ which precedes all our perceptions and experiences. It gives a sense of belongingness to all kinds of experiences that come within the realm of our consciousness. Ethically, it is symbolic of selfishness,

which is a negative quality in ethics. Though in a normal sense, 'ego' is not unethical, more often it leads one to disregard others' interests in favour of one's own interests and propels one to act unethically. Spiritually, this sense of 'I', when it is limited and identified with body, senses, mind, and intellect, is a kind of wrong identification of the inner Self. This is the root cause of various types of delusions that make one's life agonising.

That which always follows the sense of 'I-ness' is the sense of 'mine'. This leads to attachment with certain persons and objects, towards whom we develop an unrealistic sense of possessiveness and ownership. There is a beautiful quotation attributed to Jalaluddin Rumi, a 13th Century Sufi Mystic from Persia. He says:

There came one and knocked at the door of the Beloved. And a voice answered and said, 'Who is there?' The lover replied, 'It is I.' 'Go hence', returned the voice; 'there is no room within for thee and me.' Then came the lover a second time and knocked, and again the voice demanded, 'Who is there?' He answered, 'It is thou.' 'Enter', said the voice, 'for I am within'.⁸

It is evident from the above that the ego is an obstacle in the path of spiritual journey. Not only that, it leads one to the brink of insecurity in life. Fear and anxiety linger in our mind due to egocentric consciousness, that is, our awareness centred on the ego. It is the ego that manifests in the form of fear and anxiety. Further, ego also causes a state of emptiness in which one feels a lack of meaning or purpose in life and develops emotional numbness, despair, or depression.

The ego also creates harmful effects on the intellectual and emotional faculties of a human being. It produces a state of illusion, in which we form imaginary mental images and end up with uninterrupted endless inner conversations, which have no correspondence to the actual reality. The egocentric consciousness, when unchecked, also becomes the cause of an unbalanced emotional state and develop identity fears. These fears, primarily concerned with our identity, manifest as fears of being judged by others. The fear of public speaking is one of such fears.

In the emotional realm, the idea of 'I' and 'mine' is like a *boundary* for ever-expanding love and compassion. The ego restricts these noble sentiments to oneself, one's own family, and the like. This contraction leads to the tapering of the idea of belonging to one's own being or family and results in selfishness, the breeding ground of all corruption and evil.

What is Compassion?

Compassion is the feeling of oneness with others. It is not just showing sympathy and empathy towards others. In the words of the Gita, real compassion is '*sarva-bhūtastham ātmānaḥ*; seeing the Self in all beings' or '*sarva-bhūtāni chātmani*; seeing all beings in the Self.'⁹ This is the ultimate goal that Sri Krishna is placing before us, in which the love and concern towards others flow naturally from our hearts due to same-sightedness.

It is this ennobling idea of compassion that unites the people belonging to different races, religions, and nations into one single family. This is the essence of all religions, which say unequivocally that we are all the children of God; children of immortality.

Vedanta says that we are of the nature of infinite existence, knowledge, and bliss, which is a common factor that binds us all. It is this spiritual vision or enlightenment which is the source of real compassion. The goal of our life is to become sources of compassion, speakers of compassion, and doers of compassionate acts guided by this spiritual ideal, since compassion is *inherent* in us while the ego is an *external* obstacle to its manifestation.

Love and compassion are the two faces of the same coin. Benign love is just another name of compassion. We know that true love emerges from the vision of oneness, which is the ingredient of true compassion also. It is the spiritual goal that Vedanta teaches as the consummation of human life.

How to Reduce Ego?

1. **Upanishadic Method:** The Upanishads teach a genuine search and discovery of the true 'I'. A human is intrinsically pure in nature. That purity is the characteristic of *Atman*, the Self. The Upanishads say that the Self is pure existence, pure knowledge, and pure Bliss in *infinite* terms. *Katha Upanishad* says: 'Just as fire, though one, having entered the world, assumes separate forms in respect of different shapes, similarly, the Self inside all things, though one, assumes a form in respect of each shape; and (yet) It is outside.'¹⁰

Hence our real 'I' is infinite pure existence, infinite pure knowledge, and infinite pure bliss. This awareness will reduce the evil effects of the ego and makes our life illumined and fulfilled.

2. **The Path of Devotion:** We should surrender our ego to God. Our will of doing or achieving something is the offshoot of our ego. We should merge that petty, imperfect will with God's will as God has more glorious plans for us. The Lord teaches in the Gita: 'O son of Pandu, he who works for Me, accepts Me as the supreme Goal, is devoted to Me, is devoid of attachment and free from enmity towards all beings—he attains me.'¹¹

When we can slowly lower our will in front of God's will, we see the hand of God in whatever that happens to us in our life. It will be wiser if we become the instruments of God as great prophets like Lord Buddha and Jesus Christ, who did not act dictated by their egos. Misery, happiness, good, bad—are all gifts from God. As they are all from God, they are meant for our own welfare, for our own good. Hence, we should see *divinity* in every aspect of life. *Isha Upanishad* exhorts in its opening sentence: '*Īśā vāsyamidaṁ sarvaṁ yatkiñca jagatyāṁ jagat*'; all this—whatsoever moves on earth—should be covered by the Lord.'¹²

3. **Yoga method of concentration and work:** Purity of mind is achieved through meditation and selfless work. The pure mind reflects the divine Self within and the covering of the ego gradually disappears in due course. This is the essence of *Raja Yoga*, the yoga of meditation and *Karma Yoga*, the yoga of selfless service. Swamiji says: 'Man thinks foolishly that he can make himself happy, and after years of struggle finds out at last that true happiness consists in killing selfishness and that no one can make him happy except himself.'¹³

4. **Sri Ramakrishna's Method:** Sri Rama-krishna once said:

I said to Keshab Sen that he would not be able to realize God without renouncing the ego. He said, 'Sir, in that case I should not be able to keep my organization together.' Thereupon I said to him: 'I am asking you to give up the 'unripe ego', the 'wicked ego'. But there is no harm in the 'ripe ego', the 'child ego', the 'servant ego', the 'ego of Knowledge'.

The worldly man's ego, the 'ignorant ego', the 'unripe ego', is like a thick stick. It divides, as it were, the water of the Ocean of Satchidananda. But the 'servant ego', the 'child ego', the 'ego of Knowledge', is like a line on the water. One clearly sees that there is only one expanse of water. The dividing line makes it appear that the water has two parts, but one clearly sees that in reality there is only one expanse of water.¹⁴

The rationale of this seemingly simple but effective method of ego reduction is very much evident. It is the process of attenuating the strong, all-pervasive ego into a submissive ego, which is ready to accept the omnipotent nature of the Supreme Lord. This is the path one should take to merge one's ego into Divine Will.

5. **Sri Ramana Maharshi's Method:** Sri Ramana Maharshi is one of the few great mystics who taught non-dualism in the form of a pragmatic method of internal analysis. He says in plain words that ego is non-existent:

The individual soul of the form of 'I' is the ego. The Self which is of the nature of intelligence (*chit*) has no sense of 'I'. Nor does the insentient body possess a sense of 'I'. The mysterious appearance of a delusive ego between the intelligent and the insentient, being the root cause of all these troubles, upon its destruction by whatever means, that which really exists will be seen as it is. This is called Liberation (*moksha*).¹⁵

The 'destruction of the ego', as Sri Ramana Maharshi calls the process, can be achieved through *Self-Enquiry*. An incident is cited from his life. When a devotee wailed of his suffering life, Sri Ramana Maharshi

asked him to try to find out who really was suffering and why. It is obvious that the one who is suffering is our ego, the false 'I'. This kind of enquiry will lead us to the discovery of the 'real I', which is different from the ego. Sri Ramana Maharshi explains this process:

You must distinguish between the 'I', pure in itself, and the 'I'-thought. The latter, being merely a thought, sees subject and object, sleeps, wakes up, eats and thinks, dies and is reborn. But the pure 'I' is the pure Being, eternal existence, free from ignorance and thought-illusion. If you stay as the 'I', your being alone, without thought, the I-thought will disappear and the delusion will vanish for ever. In a cinema-show, you can see pictures only in a very dim light or in darkness. But when all the lights are switched on, the pictures disappear. So also in the flood-light of the supreme *Atman* all objects disappear.¹⁶

The quintessence is that we have to recognise the true nature of the Self, the true centre of our spirit, and understand that the true Self is hidden by our super-developed ego. After countless experiences, the ego realises that the only power that can overcome itself is the true Self, leading to Self-awareness.

This Self-awareness leads to Self-Education, which in turn brings about the transformation of consciousness and reduction of ego. What is achieved through this life-long struggle is the freedom unrestricted by the boundaries caused by the ego. The psychological benefit is that we will no longer be the prisoners of concern, preoccupation, anxiety, or fear.

When we embark on this spiritual journey of attenuating our ego, what is most essential is not to sympathise with our egoistic mind. We should not preserve little ideas or fantasies in our mind. Our goal should be to transcend the ego, step out of it, and establish ourselves in the truth.

How does the Reduction in Ego Increase Compassion?

When the ego is reduced, what fills up its place is the *Love of God*, which translates itself into universal love for the whole of humanity, which in common word is called compassion. This universal love is the offshoot of a sense of equanimity and same-sightedness, which once again is the result of spiritual enlightenment.

In that state, God no longer remains an individual; He becomes a principle. He becomes our own existence, experience, and bliss-love. True love of God in this perfect state becomes the love for the whole of humanity. The spiritual journey is the journey of finding the source of this compassion, God, who is also the source of true bliss, true love, and true wisdom. It will make one's life truly fulfilled and blessed.

Spiritual experience is the dissolution of our ego. We cannot escape the prison of egocentric consciousness by feeding it, making it better and better by creating new walls and new windows, thereby becoming the prisoners of our own ego. We should recognise the true centre of our being, the true centre of our Self, which according to Vedanta is the Universal Self itself. In the Gita, Sri Krishna beautifully depicts this state of finding oneness with the whole:

One who sees Me in everything, and sees all things in Me—I do not go out from his vision, and he also is not lost to My vision. That Yogi who, being established in unity, adores Me as existing in all things, he exists in Me—in whatever condition he may be. O Arjuna, that Yogi is considered the best who judges the happiness and sorrow in all beings by the same standard as he would apply to himself.¹⁷

Achieving this state of true compassion makes one's life meaningful and rewarding in the true sense.

References

¹ Gita, 12.13.

² *Vivekachudamani*, 93-94.

³ *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, 9 vols (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1-8, 1989; 9, 1997), 5.318.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 6.42.

⁵ *Patanjali Yoga Sutra*, 2.3 and 2.4.

⁶ Ibid., 2.6.

⁷ *Complete Works*, 1.238–39.

⁸ *Hafiz: The Mystic Poets*, trans. Gertrude Bell (Woodstock, Vermont, US: SkyLights Paths Publishing, 2004), 36.

⁹ Gita, 6.29.

¹⁰ *Katha Upanishad*, 2.2.9.

¹¹ Gita, 11.55.

¹² *Isha Upanishad*, 1.

¹³ *Complete Works*, 1.84.

¹⁴ M., *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, trans. Swami Nikhilananda (Chennai: Ramakrishna Math, 2004), 480.

¹⁵ *Spiritual Instruction of Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharshi* (Tiruvannamalai: Sri Ramanasramam, 1974), 6.

¹⁶ *Be As You Are: The Teachings of Sri Ramana Maharshi*, Ed. David Godman (London: Arkana, Penguin Books, 1985), 52.

¹⁷ Gita, 6.30–32.