



The illusion of separation

“Ego” isn’t considered a positive thing yet it serves an important role and, when you befriend it, you may just glimpse the true, universal essence that lies beneath.

Words Diana Timmins

The ego is often a hot topic for discussion that — both rightfully and wrongfully — cops quite a beating. Many people consider it the root of all suffering that should be abolished, yet this isn’t necessarily the case. Many great yogis clarify an imperative correction: ego does not create insufferable disconnection; rather, this is caused by an over-identification with ego. It’s when you promote the ego to master in command, or desperately bypass vital stages of spiritual evolution seeking its elimination, that you topple over.

“Ego” is a Latin word meaning “I” and its Sanskrit term *ahamkara* translates to “I-maker” — yet this projected self-perception doesn’t actually make us who we are. The ego may convince you that you should be more like others or others more like you when, ultimately, everyone is connected by the same universal essence lying beneath the labels we become conditioned to over-associate with. That divine essence of love and compassion is true self; ego is “small-self”.

This realisation, that we are not our bodies, thoughts, feelings, possessions, culture, religion or any ego-fabricated illusion of separation, is incredibly valuable. It could pacify internal and global wars prevalent in modern times.

Defining ego-self

Despite widespread scrutiny throughout the ages, there remains no conclusive definition of the ego. It’s true that the ego cannot be measured, seen, touched, studied beneath a microscope — but it’s difficult to deny its presence when in full swing. Amid speculation, Eastern and Western philosophies agree that ego is merely one part of a complex mind, a character we play, and does not define our true nature.

“Neuroscience posits the ego as a function that is genetically hardwired into our brain’s nervous system; that is, designed — along with the five senses and other neurological functions — to create a sense of ‘self’ and separation,” explains Dr Richard Miller, a clinical psychologist and creator of iRest Yoga Nidra. “Yogic philosophy views ego-function from the same perspective: as the brain’s creation of a separate entity among other separate entities.

“Ego is simply a projection, likened to waves upon the ocean. It has no existence separate from its underlying essence and so, ultimately, no reality of its own. Therefore, separation exists only as a mental fabrication.”

Austrian neurologist Sigmund Freud attempted to define ego in the early 1900s with his psychoanalytic theory of personality development, which dissected the mind into three parts: “id” (most basic, immediate fulfilment of needs), “ego” and “superego” (moral standards influenced by parents and teachers). He believed a newborn’s personality is entirely id until ego develops around the age of three. Once superego kicks in at around five, ego acts largely as an imperative spokesperson for solving internal conflict.

“In Western psychology, the ego is thought to function in an executive role to maintain psychic balance of the individual,” explains clinical psychologist and iRest teacher Dr Lauren Tober. “From a Freudian point of view, the ego mediates between the primitive and instinctive part of the personality (id) and the external ‘real’ world (superego). Its job is to make everything personal — and it does that beautifully! It also has important functions like helping us to navigate the world and remember to feed and care for ourselves.”

Ego was analysed well before Freudian times; one of the earliest sources being the *Upanishads*, written around 500



The ancient yogic text *Bhagavad Gita* speaks not of destroying ego, but reconnecting with an eternal consciousness clouded by it.

BCE. The *Upanishads* and other ancient yogic scriptures view the ego, or *ahamkara*, as one of four functions of the mind, alongside *manas* (sensory processing, everyday “lower” mind), *citta* (storage of impressions, unconscious mind) and *buddhi* (silent mental witness).

According to Dr Ananda Balayogi Bhavanani, chairman of Pondicherry’s International Centre for Yoga Education and Research, “The *ahamkara* is part of our inner nonphysical cognitive processes and is a ladder that enables us to consciously climb by choice along [life’s] path. It is an essential tool that makes us ‘do’ what we ‘need’ in lower states of evolution. The danger is when the line of ‘need’ and ‘greed’ gets blurred.”

What shapes the ego?

We all have an ego; some of us have an underactive one, some grandiose. Ego imbalances often trigger, among other symptoms, a greedy sense of ownership and entitlement, a “need” for external validation and gratification. Social worker and founder of Body Love Yoga, Sarah Ball, says over-identifying with the small-self increases susceptibility to the *kleshas*, or obstacles such

as ignorance, attachment, aversion and fear of death. So, what factors contribute to ego imbalance?

“Genetics play a role in how self-perception emerges but environment and social experiences are invariably the largest influences,” Ball says. “Stigma, poverty, shame or discrimination can play a huge role in our egoic structure. Unsettling experiences in early life and development into adulthood can really impact the way our ego expresses itself; our stable sense of a reliable self-identity.”

From a yogic perspective, Dr Bhavanani believes ego is primarily influenced by unconscious habitual patterns (*samskara*) and inherent tendencies (*vasana*) that are carried across lifetimes. These are largely related to the *kleshas*, which he describes as inborn psychological afflictions, and action-reaction bondages (*karma-bandha*). “The biggest influence of all, however, is how we relate to our own selves,” he stresses. “When we are at ease with our self, the ego is subdued. If not, it becomes malignant.”

A tight correlation undoubtedly exists between ego and self-esteem, and yoga provides therapeutic tools to enhance self-worth.

Still, Ball warns, the mainstream portrayal of yoga “perfection” may have adverse effects if it sends messages that you don’t fit the “ideal” mould — or most fashionable tights on the rack!

“The modern yoga culture of bendy social media pictures, commercial ‘yogic’ detoxes and impressive yoga gear seems an extension of confusion about what brings true relief,” she says. “If [the yoga] community stems from motives based on ego validation, the essence of yoga may get lost and absorbed into the larger web of consumerist ego-striving emptiness.

“Although, many feel it doesn’t matter what brings someone to yoga, because experience of union on an internal level is what will sustain the practice long term. Yoga is an exploratory science based on rigorous investigation of what leads to inner freedom; being too prescriptive about the ‘right way’ to practice can be an extension of ego itself.”

Patently polish, not abolish

Is ego really the cause of suffering and in need of abolition? Quite likely not. As Steven Hinchliffe, founder of Wollongong’s Vinyasa Yoga Studio, explains, ego is not the enemy. “Ahamkara is required by the body to function in the phenomenal world. The association of ‘me’ with the ego, body, mind and personality is the issue. As the saying goes, ‘Ego makes a wonderful servant, but a terrible master.’ Once we dissolve attachment to the ahamkara and clearly see it as a character we’re playing, it allows the self to experience diversity of life within oneness of consciousness.”

The Ancient yogic text *Bhagavad Gita* speaks not of destroying ego, but reconnecting with an eternal consciousness clouded by it. You may therefore find peace not by eliminating ego itself, necessarily, but by workshopping your relationship with it. Patanjali’s *Yoga Sutras* relates yoga as silencing the mind’s fluctuations largely relating to the ego’s sense of separation. Through the practice of concentration (*dharana*), you can witness the ego-mind in action; that persistent chatter that rates experiences and performance as “good” or “bad”.

Hinchliffe elaborates. “The ego becomes afraid of its dissolution and tries to keep pulling us back into the sense of identification with it, particularly once serious self-enquiry is commenced. Acute awareness of arising thoughts is our only necessary tool. Any thought based on past or future should be ignored ... At a certain point, the ego realises it will not be destroyed, but merely ‘polished’; it then no longer fights the process of self-enquiry, and becomes an ally.”

Voicing a healthy ego

Dr Lauren Tober and Sarah Ball offer these simple tips to reverse unhealthy communication patterns that may reinforce the ego’s false sense of identity:

- **Rephrase.** Instead of expressing feelings with statements such as “I am sad” or “I am tired”, Dr Tober suggests that you rephrase in a less labelling manner: “sadness is arising” or “tiredness is present”.
- **“I just am.”** The ego often makes “I will be ... when I ...” aspirations, then swings to deflating “I am not ...” statements if unfulfilled. To remain more positive and present, Ball suggests adopting the *so hum* (“I am my larger self”) mantra. To do this, combine the *so hum* mantra with your breath for as long as you like, concentrating on “so” on the inhale, “hum” on the exhale. Extend your mantra practice by incorporating mala, or prayer, beads. Close your eyes softly and focus on “so hum” as you pass each bead (there are usually 54 or 108).

It is possible to momentarily silence ego through deep meditative states — but total elimination is unlikely. Some highly enlightened beings may supposedly approach “egolessness”; however, Ball warns that an attempt to fast-track self-inquiry may catapult spiritual emergence into emergency. “Stephen Cope addresses this beautifully in *Yoga and the Quest for the True Self*,” says Ball. “[He states] we must establish a stable sense of egoic structure before we can safely unpack and unwind ourselves from this identity and move freely into the larger self that yoga practices enable.

“Leaping straight to the ‘light’ without integrating our shadows’ complexities [means] we have no stable ground to observe and integrate expansion of the larger self. Our quick-fix culture offering transformational promises makes us more susceptible to this ‘spiritual-bypass’; this destabilises ego function and leaves us feeling disorientated and distressed.”

So, then, the goal of yoga is not to eliminate a fundamental aspect of the mind but to slowly soften, perhaps fleetingly still, the ego’s waves, allowing surface ripples to settle so you may recognise the true essence of what lies beneath — within yourself and others. Don’t try to fight, change or rid yourself of ego. Doing so, according to Dr Miller, is an expression of ego itself. Instead, grow familiar with the ego, befriend it — and follow that awareness fondly toward the freedom of true self-realisation. ♀