

The Ego in Western and Indian Psychology

JACQUES VIGNE

Bulletin of the Ramakrishna Mission Institute
of Culture - Gel Park Calcutta April 1999

Ego is that part of the psyche which enables one to say 'I'. It has a central role, and to understand it, one must go beyond what the various spiritual traditions say. The Greek Fathers used to see in *philautia* (the attachment to ego), the common basis of the difficulties of inner evolution.

One could say of the ego what is said of money: it is a good servant but a bad master. It is also like the driver of a luxury car who forgets the owner who is on the back seat and believes that he is the only master aboard. Not being

identified with mind does not mean not using it at all, but only using it wisely. Mind should be like hands and feet which rest if not in use. Then it can be said that mind functions without ego.

Psychoanalysis presents ego with its defensive aspect: pulled between the *Id* and the *Overself*, its main role being to activate defence mechanisms. Another definition of ego seems interesting to me: 'Ego is the total sum of all our attachments.' Western psychologists who go to the end of their reflections will agree with the idea that guilt, fear, inferiority complex and reactions of projection are not accidental qualities of the ego, but are parts of its very structure. Ego is somehow fragmented; one must go from the

superficial impression of personal unity, to the real unity beyond the person. Trust in this superior unity will enable us to reorganize the fragments of ego, just as iron filings, when polarized in a magnetic field, organize themselves according to a new line of force. An individual who thus sees consistency

behind the chaos of ego sees his capacities radically changed.

Human sciences clearly show that one can study a phenomenon well only by replacing it in its context, that one could understand a form well only by seeing it with its

background. For Indian thought, ego or 'I' can be rightly studied only in relationship to this background which the Self is. But usually it seems that people go near a huge tank, take a small glass of water and say: 'This is "I".'

The ego represents both a theoretical question of comparative psychology and a practical problem for the spiritual aspirant who would like to go beyond it without knowing how. Before dealing with the notion of ego in the East and the West, I would like to point out that going beyond ego is important not only for good psychic health, but also for the body. Those patients that cardiologists classify in the A-type personality have a typical profile of ego hypertrophy.

The 'ego' represents both a theoretical question of comparative psychology and a practical problem for a spiritual aspirant who would like to go beyond it without knowing how. The author, who is an eminent French psychologist doing research in India for years, discusses in this article how ego has been looked at by Indian sages and thinkers and by Western psychologists. He concludes by saying that ego has its role in psyche, but when it gets hypertrophied, it can become like a malignant tumour. So it is better to get disentangled from it as soon as possible.

In this sense one may quote Larry Scherwitz, a psychologist at the University of California. Scherwitz recorded conversations with more than five hundred men, of which one third were heart patients, the others in good health. While listening to these records, he counted how many times each of them used the words 'I', 'my', and 'mine'. By comparing the results of the normal group with those of the heart patients, Scherwitz realized that heart patients made more use of these words. Besides, by following up these patients for several years, he discovered that the more a man spoke of himself, the more chances he had of having a heart attack. The author concludes that the antidote was to be more generous and respectful of the others, less ego-centered.¹ This is the first step of the long way to ego-forgetfulness which has deeper roots than egotism in the moral sense of the term. Tasne Ikani, the oldest woman in Japan, stated on her 116th birthday that she thought she had a long life because she never had been egoistic, and she had completely surrendered the care of her life to nature.

Ego in the West : Narcissus and personalism

There is a slight difference between the notions of ego and person, ego being more circumscribed, with often a pejorative undertone, while the word 'person' denotes a more positive aspect (see for instance the dignity of the person). However, both meanings have a common basis. Christianity, as well as popular psychology, has the notion of a 'hard kernel' in every person, able to resist outer pressures at any cost and to affirm itself individually. This idea of person was developed by the school of personalism in the '30s, at a time when individuals were threatened by the storm of totalitarian regimes and by materialist psychology. I spoke

of the notion of person in a text giving a general overview of the relationship between non-dualism and Christianity. Roughly speaking, one could say that totalitarian ideologies and materialistic psychologies 'go out' from the person downward, while mysticism and the traditional Eastern psychology go out of it upward, and eventually reach beyond. To constitute oneself as a person is necessary for the child and the adolescent. Learning to respect the person of the partner in a couple is important for a young adult to counterbalance the primary drive of physical urge in the couple. Going beyond the person is a necessity for him who has reached an inner naturation.

The Narcissus myth is often interpreted in a simplistic way: 'Don't care too much for yourself; if you do you will have trouble.' Narcissus was admiring the reflection of his face in water and finally fell in and drowned. But more than this, one may recognize in this an evocation of a complete itinerary of meditation, especially if one connects it with the path of knowledge. Narcissus' body represents the ego based on identification with the physical body. In the beginning, Ovid, the Latin poet, describes Narcissus 'as beautiful as ivory': this is the stage before adolescence, when he was still mostly centered on himself and so as cold as ivory. Then he falls in love with the nymph Echo, but she left her body instead of giving herself physically and only sent him back his own words and thoughts: this underlines in a very clear way the ultimately illusory side of physical love, which is a projection and which adds to the identification of one's own body with the body of someone else; instead of grasping the object of one's desires, one faces only one's own mental projections. This leads Narcissus to question himself, to come back inside and to split himself into two polarities, the observer and the object of

observation, which is the very basis of the path of knowledge. This process unfolds the 'dissolution of the body', that is indeed the dissolution of the ego based on the identification with the body. Then Ovid states that Narcissus continues to observe his own image in the waters of the Styx, the underground stream which is also connected with oblivion of the past life by people who cross it after dying recently. At the place where his body was remains a flower with a yellow heart, white petals and a pervasive smell. His companions eventually find it. Thus, the meditator who gave up identification with the body keeps on observing the stream of consciousness in the depths of his own self. The body which is being seen by onlookers and visitors is there only out of compassion for others. This compassion, symbolized by the flower named narcissus, makes its purity beam around and sheds its fragrance for anyone who passes by.

A certain psychology reduces the consciousness beyond the ego to the Overself; this is an obvious mistake, even without taking into account spirituality. How could we explain the Overself of psychoanalysis (made out of parental taboos) poetic, artistic and even only intellectual intuition? Likewise, the *Id* of psychoanalysis cannot be confused with the Self: this would be identifying the petrol which makes the car work with the owner of the car. Ego, which is based on the instinctive drives of nature, is not irrevocably opposed to culture; this is a duality which must be transcended as much as the other ones.²

Western psychology is much interested in the inferiority complexes, etc. which ego can develop, but in India it is said that the very ego is a complex, even a double-complex since it is entangled in itself and entangled with the body inasmuch as it is identified with it. In the evolution of species,

palaeocortex (the basic animal instincts) has been included and regulated by neocortex; likewise, in inner evolution, our ego must be included and regulated by the Self.

Real therapy has an 'impersonalizing' effect in the good sense of the term. One comes to realize that certainly, there are victims, but no culprits. Patients are no more paralyzed by deeply entrenched guilt feelings. In fields other than psychology, great minds such as Einstein's had a clear idea of the necessity of going beyond ego: 'The genuine value of a human being first depends upon the extent and the sense in which he reached the freedom from ego.'³

Absence of ego in the East : 'powerful impersonality'

An important distinction to make in order to understand the Indian thought regarding the ego is differentiating *sattvic* ego from the absence of ego. The spiritual aspirant must first transform the *tamasic* ego (laziness, etc.) into *rajasic* ego (capacity for work, but attachment and anger also) and then into a *sattvic* (purity, etc.) one. Then and only then can one hope to be devoid of ego. One can see the necessity of the constitution of a *sattvic* ego in the advice given by Krishna in the *Bhagavad-Gita*: 'It is by himself only that one should lift oneself.' (VI, 5) In Indian society, one can say that the decision to embrace monastic life (*sannyasa*), to renounce everything for God in spite of opposition of the family, etc. represents a manifestation of *sattvic* ego, which is not unrelated to Jungian individuation. This does not imply that the ego or person will ever be free because it is just from this ego and this person that one should be free. To express this clearly, sages prefer to speak of themselves in an impersonal way: Ramakrishna used to say 'here' while pointing to himself, Swami Ramdas from Kanhangad

used to speak of 'Ramdas' as if someone else was concerned, Ma Anandamayi used to say 'this body'.

We will now examine successively the *sattvic* ego and the absence of ego.

Ramakrishna clearly states: 'The consciousness of self is of two kinds: one ripe, the other unripe. "Nothing is mine, whatever I see, feel, or hear—nay, even this body itself is not mine. I am always eternal, free, and all-knowing"—such consciousness as this originates in the ripe ego; while the unripe ego makes man feel forever related to the transitory things of the world. "This is my house, this is my child, this is my wife"—consciousness like this is the manifestation of the unripe ego.'⁴

Consciousness is trapped by ego only temporarily. The time will come when it will be free again, if not in this life. Sometimes, one makes the differentiation between *aham* which is the pure and superior 'I', indeed the impersonal 'I', we could say in a paradoxical way, and *ahamkara*, which is the ordinary ego that we make with the net of our desires and worries. Indian spiritual psychology is much less interested than modern Western psychology in the contents of ego or mind. It is more interested in the way in which one can have his *buddhi* (intelligence) disentangled from them.

The common defence mechanism of the ego is so natural that psychologists forget to mention it as such: this is dispersion, distraction (*vikshepa*), a fundamental notion of Vedanta. By the way, it is interesting to note the similarity between the Sanskrit words—*chitta* (memory), and *chinta* (worry, disquiet). This suggests that the idea that most problems come from the past was already implicit in the Sanskrit vocabulary, the closest to the original Indo-European source. One can also note the double mean-

ing of *soch*, namely thought and anxiety.

To conclude these short reflection on the *sattvic* ego, we can point out that renouncing one's ego does not mean becoming a slave to the ego of others. Ma Anandamayi says clearly: 'Be very careful never to fall under the influence of someone. To remain steady, composed, deeply serious, and heroic keep your personality intact, honest, pure and holy; remain centered in God.'⁵

The absence of ego

The concept of absence of ego is not exclusive to India; one can find in Taoist texts phrases such as 'going in an empty boat', 'vomit one's intelligence', 'thinking without head' and so on. The word *atma* in Sanskrit is interesting. As there are no capitals in *devnagari* the word can mean both poles, the extremes of inner evolution, the small self, and the universal Self. When I began my study of Indian philosophy and psychology, I thought it was the sign of a theoretical confusion, but afterwards I realized that this uncertainty of meaning was reflecting the uncertainty of inner reality, where we continuously evolve from self to Self. To progress in this sense, giving up the idea of being a doer (*karta*) is a must. Ramakrishna gives striking similes. He says: Vegetables in the cooking pot move and leap and the children think they are living beings. But the grown-ups explain they are not moving by themselves; if the fire is taken away, they will soon cease to stir. So it is ignorance which thinks 'I am the doer'. All our strength is the strength of God. All is silent if the fire be removed. A marionette dances well while the wires are pulled; but when the master's hand is gone, it falls inert.⁶

There are four ultimate idolatries: body; oneself considered as a person, i.e., ego; spiritual master considered as a physical

person; and the Divine, considered as a metaphysical person. When one is really no more identified with the body, the three other idolatries vanish by themselves; before this, they seem real at their respective levels.

Identification is deeply rooted even in our vocabulary: don't we say in English for 'a person' 'somebody'? Death of the ego appears, according to the testimony of those mystics who experienced it, more frightening than the death of body itself. Nevertheless, it is at the same time an opportunity to rejoice. Nisargadatta Maharaj compares it to the joy felt when, after believing that a friend had died in a train accident, one eventually realizes that he had not taken this train at all.⁷ Ego and permanence are two notions which support each other. When we suppress one, the other automatically collapses. When we focus on impermanence, the ego gets dissolved. The result of this process is an essential absence of fear, as Nisargadatta said to his visitors: 'Your world is like a stranger, and you're afraid of it. My world is myself, I am at home.'⁸

Nobody is separate

This pristine idea which was supported by mystics is current among scientists too. A well-known specialist of cognitive sciences, Francisco Varela, who is also a personal friend of the Dalai Lama, fully supports the idea of the absence of ego, and is not against the notion of the non-substantiality of the world, which does not prevent, according to him, the emergence of a global ethics.⁹

A relatively recent notion in psychology which has become quite popular is that of *subpersonality*, which is also called multiple personality or states of ego. They are not the only characteristics of schizophrenia or major cases of split personality, but can be found in a minor way among most people.

According to the situation, the person changes roles, and it often seems that these different roles have little relationship with each other.¹⁰

The person is more than a mask (in Latin, *persona*); he is a whole series of masks. A practical way of meditating is to look at one's own face from inside, i.e., no more the face built up to communicate to others, but a relaxed, natural face, 'the face one had before birth' to take the formulation of a Zen koan.

The ideal ego is often criticized by psychologists as being a source of illusions about oneself. Indeed, this is true since the genuine ideal is the absence of ego. However, practically, an ideal of ego is needed. It should be like the runner who sprints just ahead of a sportsman to train him: he should be neither too near, because the trainee will slow down, nor too far ahead, because then he will be discouraged. After pursuing this ideal of ego for a long time, one has a chance to really achieve the ideal beyond ego, which means *Liberation*.

Western psychology which is based on common sense has a superficial idea of individuals as being separated like islands. On the contrary, traditional, especially Indian psychology knows there is a common base, a shelf which links islands to one another.¹¹ Ego has its role in psyche, but when it gets hypertrophied, it can become like a malignant tumour. Meditating means developing immunity against this growth. In any case, one should know that the ego in itself is incurable; better to get disentangled from it as soon as possible. At this point one reaches what the *Gita* describes as a stability, *atmanyatmana*, 'in oneself by oneself' or 'in the Self by the Self'. This experience of unity with others is the foundation of true compassion. ■

NOTES & REFERENCES

- 1 Quoted by Barrere in *Choisir de ne pas vieillir* (choosing not to grow old), *Troisieme Millenaire*, n. 37, p. 88.
- 2 Vigne Jacques, *Indian Wisdom, Christianity and Modern Psychology*, ch. 14 and 15, BRPC, Delhi, 1996, also available on the Internet, see below.
- 3 Einstein Albert, *Ideas and Opinions*, Crown Publishers, 1954, and Rupa, 1993, p. 12.
- 4 *Teachings of Sri Ramakrishna*, Advaita Ashrama, Calcutta, 1994, p. 22.
- 5 Ma Anandamayi *Vie en jeu*, presented by JC Marol Accarias, Paris, 1995, p. 81.
- 6 *Teachings of Sri Ramakrishna*, op. cit. p. 24.
- 7 Nisargadatta Maharaj, *Seeds of Consciousness*, Acorn Press, p. 164.
- 8 *ibid.*, p. 17.
- 9 Varela Francisco, *L'inscription corporelle de l'esprit* Seuil, 1993, p. 8.
- 10 Walkins JG, in BB Wolman *Handbook of States of Consciousness*, Van Nostrand Reinhold Company, New York, 1986, p. 134 sqq.
- 11 Those who want more information on the topics of ego and personality in Indian thought should see *The Indian Cultural Heritage of India*, Vol. III, The Philosophies, part on personality.

‘The Seer is Really the Self’

Ignorance is the cause of egoism, attachment, aversion, and clinging to life. These impressions exist in different states. They are sometimes dormant. You often hear the expression ‘innocent as a baby,’ yet in the baby may be the state of a demon or of a god, which will come out by degrees. In the Yogi, these impressions, the Samskaras left by past actions, are attenuated, that is, exist in a very fine state, and he can control them, and not allow them to become manifest. ‘Overpowered’ means that sometimes one set of impressions is held down for a while by those that are stronger, but they come out when that repressing cause is removed. The last state is the ‘expanded,’ when the Samskaras, having helpful surroundings, attain to a great activity, either as good or evil....

All the different sorts of impressions have one source, ignorance. We have first to learn what ignorance is. All of us think, ‘I am the body, and not the Self, the pure, the effulgent, the ever blissful,’ and that is

ignorance. We think of man, and see man as body. This is the great delusion....

The seer is really the Self, the pure one, the ever holy, the infinite, the immortal. This is the Self of man. And what are the instruments? The Chitta or mind-stuff, the Buddhi or determinative faculty, the Manas or mind, and the Indriyas or sense-organs. These are the instruments for him to see the external world, and the identification of the Self with the instruments is what is called the ignorance of egoism. 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? ■

—From *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Vol. I, pp. 237-238