

## *A Confident Ego*

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The word “ego” has two main meanings, which is a source of a lot of confusion, as people get the meanings confused. There’s the bad ego and the good ego. The bad ego is the one who’s selfish, who doesn’t care about the needs of others, and has a very high opinion of him or herself and low opinion of everybody else. Then there’s the ego that’s a necessary part of your mind. That’s the ego that the psychologists talk about—the one that has to negotiate between your sense of what you should do and your sense of what you want to do, because sometimes the shoulds can get awfully oppressive. And if you have the wrong set of shoulds in your mind, a wrong set of obligations that you feel, they can wear you down. On the other hand, if your wants take over, they have no rhyme or reason at all, and they can destroy your life. So you have to figure out some way to negotiate between the two. This is the kind of ego you need—and you need to train it to be healthy, because negotiation requires a lot of skill.

Years back, there was a psychologist who wrote a book about five healthy ego functions. And it turns out that they all correspond to things in the Buddha’s teachings. The first is anticipation, which in the Buddha’s teachings is heedfulness—the ability to see that there are dangers down the road, and if you don’t get your act together, you’re going to suffer. You have to have that heedful sense of self in order to function properly. You have to be able to use it to overcome your desire to do just whatever you want, without concern for the future.

The second healthy ego function is altruism, which in the Buddha’s terminology is compassion together with goodwill. You realize that your happiness cannot depend on causing harm to other people. So in your quest for happiness, you have to take their happiness into consideration, to be sensitive to their needs. This, too, is a healthy ego function.

The third quality is suppression—your ability to say no, either to desires that are wrong or to your sense of obligations that may be wrong. Now, suppression is different from repression. Repression is when you deny that something is there. Of course, when you deny it, it goes down underground and turns into *The Thing*—and crops up someplace else. But when you suppress something, you know it’s there, but you consciously say no to it. And if you’re skilled, you can be effective.

But you need the assistance of the fourth function, which is called sublimation. In other words, when you deny yourself an unhealthy pleasure, you

should find a healthy pleasure to put in its place. Now, in the Buddha's terminology, suppression is restraint. And although there's no analogous term for sublimation, the practice of concentration, which you're doing right now, is a kind of sublimation. You're trying to find a healthy pleasure—a pleasure that's harmless. It doesn't harm you, doesn't cloud the mind, doesn't harm anybody else. You're sitting here just breathing, but you're able to find pleasure in that. And if you develop that skill, it becomes an important tool in your arsenal when you're dealing with obstreperous emotions—the ones that constantly want to be fed, that want their pleasures *right now*. They don't care about the future. No matter how much your anticipation or heedfulness is telling you that you've got to prepare for the future, there's part of you that says No. This is where the ability to tap into a source of pleasure at any time becomes an important tool in your negotiation. You say, "Look, have this! Feed off of rapture, feed off of pleasure. Take the rapture and let it fill the body. Take the pleasure and let it fill the body. Why do you need to go off and do that unskillful thing?" This, too, is an important ego function.

And then the fifth function that the psychologist listed was humor—your ability to laugh at the stupidity of your desires or the stupidity of some idea of what you should do that you picked up from who knows where, and you begin to see—as you get things into perspective—that it's actually oppressive and that it doesn't serve any purpose. You can put it aside. The Buddha doesn't talk much about humor, but there are fine examples throughout the Canon of his use of the right kind of humor—the good-natured laugh at human foibles. If you can laugh at your own foibles, laugh at your own defilements, that weakens them quite a bit, and it puts you in a good position, in which you separate yourself from them. Because to laugh at a situation, you have to be able to stand outside of it.

It's like reading *Petit Nicolas*. He's a little kid and he isn't trying to be funny. But he reports what's in the situation. We're the readers and we're standing outside, and we see, "Ah, there's humor in that situation," even though sometimes the people in the situation are not finding it funny at all. Your ability to stand outside is what gives you strength in dealing with your own defilements.

Then there's another quality that the Buddha talks about as being an important part of a healthy sense of yourself. It's interesting that the psychologist didn't mention it in his list of healthy ego functions, because he does make the point in his book that—especially, in adult personality of development, when somebody whose development was arrested in childhood and needs to enter the adult world—usually, they need somebody to give them confidence. He gives the

example of Tolstoy who as a youth was not much. But his wife gave him a lot of strength and a lot of encouragement. And ultimately, he became a great author.

Now, the Buddha actually talks about this—the need for admirable friends, and the need for confidence on the path—your need to believe that you can do this. Perhaps one of the reasons why the psychologist didn't mention confidence is that it can be used in either way. In other words, it can be used for unhealthy ego functions or to support healthy ego functions. But it is necessary, especially when you're on the path like this. There are times when the path seems really difficult, and you wonder if you have it in you, "Can I do this path?" You've got to have that sense that, "Yes, I can."

There's a passage where Ananda talks about the need for conceit—your ability to compare yourself with others and to make the comparison useful. The comparison is this: "Other people can do this. They're human beings; I'm a human being. They can do it, so why can't I?" He says you need to have that much conceit, that much confidence in yourself in order to do this.

Look at the teachings of the forest ajaans—huge volumes of, say, Ajaan Maha Boowa. A huge percentage of his talks are encouragement. You hear about Ajaan Mun setting very high standards for his students, but at the same time encouraging them that, yes, they can do this. Here, they were peasants—many of them had very little education. They were at the bottom rung on the Thai social ladder. They had been taught pretty much that "You can't do this, can't do that, can't do this." But here Ajaan Mun was saying, "Yes, you can. You've got what it takes. The 32 parts of the body we chanted right now—you've got all of those. You've got a mind. You've got what you need. It's simply a matter of putting them together."

Now, the psychologist who was doing the study could have commented, though, that the support you need, the confidence you need in order to manage your development well, will take time. The confidence has to be there all the time. So you've to learn how to give yourself pep talks. There are times when the practice goes well, and you don't need to give yourself much of an encouragement at all. Other times, when it's going very poorly: That's when you've to learn how to pull on these other ego functions.

Humor is an important one. There's a story: Years back when the first Englishman who went across the Northwest Territories, he went with a band of Dene. He was the first Englishman to entrust his life to a group of Native Americans. And he noticed that the days when they were hungry—the hunting hadn't yielded much food: Those were the days they tended to joke the most, to keep their spirits up.

So on days when your meditation isn't going well, try to give yourself a good-natured laugh. Find something in the situation where you can see the humor in it. That pulls you out of the doubt that has been debilitating you. You can use heedfulness to motivate yourself; you can use compassion. Whatever little effort you put in—every effort—is effort well spent, and it's going to be rewarded by putting your mind in a better position, a position where you're not going to be quite so irritable with other people. See each step of the path as worthwhile, as having good consequences.

This is where heedfulness comes together with compassion. Because heedfulness without compassion wouldn't be much, but when you have compassion for yourself, not only now but on into the future—that's what gives heedfulness its energy. So remind yourself that you've got what it takes. And even though things may take a while, that doesn't mean that they're not going to develop. Our problem is that, as a society, we tend to focus on things that can be done instantly. You want to be a good cook, well, all you have to do is pick up a copy of Julia Child, and she's done all the work for you. All you have to do is follow her instructions and you can come out with something really good.

Sometimes we don't even want to wait that long—we want instant pleasure, instant skill. And our education system tends to encourage that. It channels us into the areas where we're talented, the implicit lesson being that the things you're not talented at, well, someone else will take care of those for you. But here's something that no one else can take care of for you. The skill with which you treat your thoughts, your words, your deeds; the skill with which you encounter sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations: That's a skill you have to develop on your own. No one can do it for you. And it does make a big difference in your life. So whether it takes a short time or a long time is not the issue. The issue is that you just keep at it. And learn to give yourself strength and encouragement along the way.