Self and Ego

In defining Self as the subjectivity of the human essence, we must also assert that Self is never found apart from individuals. Self tells us both that we are (an existent), and something about what we are: namely, human consciousness. Any further development of the human essence and its “what-ness” or “who-ness” must take place in the lives of individuals, who each reveal something of the face of Self. These insights suggest an explanation for our desire to become who we are—to realize our individual potentiality.

The term, Ego, is most frequently used in reference to the experience of individual, personal consciousness, and I accept this. In the present context, however, the Ego cannot be viewed as an illusory experience (although this can be said of the false self, which we shall consider shortly). Rather, Ego is considered here to be the individual, intentional agent of Self. The word intentional, here, means active and responsible. Without the Ego, the potentiality of Self cannot be developed and expressed. Since it is natural for an essence to express its what-ness, we may conclude that it is natural for Self to manifest Egoically.

Ego stands in relationship to Self as a sunbeam to the sun. They are not really two different entities, but neither are they the same experience of human subjectivity. The sun, here, represents Self as the vast potentiality of human consciousness which is always present to the Ego, but which is, for the most part, unconscious. Like the sunbeam emanating from the sun, the Ego emanates from Self, having its root in Self, and its fundamental intention directed toward engagement in the outer world of other essences. Through this process of engagement and the experiences which ensue, the Ego forges its identity and its story. The “who I am” of Egoic consciousness is thus an ongoing process of discovery, with each experience revealing something new about one’s giftedness and motives. This journey has been studied extensively by psychologists, who have, as a whole, given us a more or less coherent picture of the issues and stages in Ego-development. Their analysis of the Ego-Self relationship is incoherent, however; sometimes it is even neglected. But, then, they are examining Ego-development in a far from perfect world, where the sunbeam has lost awareness of the sun from which it emanates.

We can speculate that, in a perfect world, the emanating Ego would nonetheless maintain awareness of its root in Self, and the God within and beyond. Through its ongoing, realized union with Self as the source of its own subjectivity, the Ego would experience its unity with other people in Self, and its union with the cosmos through the lower levels of being present within Self. The holistic nature of Self would be also realized; no internal splits would be experienced, no constriction of the Ego from the realm of the physical body.

Something of the glory of God would be known through Self, and, if God so wished, an inter-subjective relationship between God and Ego could also exist. No dissolution or negation of Ego-intentionality would be required to experience this marvelous, unitive
context of development. As long as the Ego maintained the same “attitude” as Self—open to God, the cosmos, social relationships, holistic experience—the identity and giftedness developed by the Ego would not contradict the unitive context. Indeed, Ego-consciousness would be the crowning glory of creation, Self, and God. Without an Ego-consciousness, there would be no one to appreciate the cosmos, no one to express Self, and no one (in this universe, at least) to praise God for it all.

The moral and spiritual implications of these reflections are many, the most important being the goodness of the individual and his or her developmental journey. It is good to be an Ego-consciousness, desiring to be, to grow, to develop our giftedness, and to share this with others. To the extent that we can do this in openness to God, social relationships, unity with the cosmos, and holistic living, we shall find our Ego experience most rich and meaningful. The problem, of course, is that this context for Ego-development has been lost, and, with it, the fullness of a healthy Egoic life.

The Ego and the False Self
The ideal relationship between Ego, Self and God described above is so drastically different from the common experience of most people that many would be inclined to believe that such harmony is only a theoretical affirmation. Unless we are quite advanced in the spiritual life, we experience Egoic consciousness in the context of insecurity, alienation, and judgmentalism. Indeed, so disordered is the Egoic experience that many writers on the spiritual life have concluded that the Ego itself is the cause of this disharmony. As we shall see, however, this view is unwarranted.

The problem for all of us is that Egoic development takes place in the context of conditional love. Why this is so does not interest the Buddhist, who maintains that even knowing the correct answer would not avail unto improvement. Reflection in the Judeo-Christian-Islamic tradition has led to the doctrine of Original Sin, in which a fall from innocence (and harmony) by our ancestors brought disorder to the whole race. The deep, fundamental unity of the human race was lost in some manner, and ever since then, a dynamic of fragmentation has been at work on both the individual and social levels. Knowing about the doctrine of Original Sin can help us to understand the human plight, but the Buddhist is correct in pointing out that such understanding does not in itself bring liberation. We need a practical understanding of our disease: what it is, how it takes root, and how it is perpetuated. This understanding in itself contributes to its demise. In an earlier work, I described the inflictions that accompany Ego development as follows:

1. The environment in which we grow up loves us conditionally. This begins in the womb, where the developing embryo is attuned to the emotional state of the mother, and, through her, to the rest of the world. Later, the care given the infant by the parents and family communicates conditional love in many ways.
2. When the embryo and later the infant is loved conditionally, he or she experiences at least a slight sense of rejection and the emotion of fear. If one is loved very little, there is great fear and distrust very deep within.
3. As the Ego begins to develop, the emotional consequences of conditional love—mostly fear, distrust, and shame—create a turmoil in our psychic energy which prevents the Ego
from developing in harmony with the Self. It is as though the light of God mediated through the Self is blocked out by these turbulent emotions. Hence, the Ego will be much more attuned to the outside world and will be in some kind of avoidance posture toward the inner world of the unconscious as it develops.

4. The ideas and images of ourselves that we pick up from the developmental environment reinforce our feeling of being loved conditionally. In many ways, we learn that we are loved for what we do, not for who we are. At the level of thought, therefore, we conclude that we are conditionally lovable and acceptable. Our self-judgment and our perception of others’ judgments of us—two integral parts of self-image—are deeply colored by this conditionality.

5. Concluding that we are only conditionally lovable and acceptable, we are constantly on the alert for the conditions by which we can become more acceptable to ourselves and others. These conditions are perceived to exist in externals—in the opinions of others, in accomplishments, in money and other possessions. The center of attention of the Ego, then, is drawn to the outside world as the source of happiness.

6. Having lost touch with the presence of God in the ground of our deepest Self, the Ego has also lost its true identity. To compensate, it identifies strongly with family roles, nation, race, athletic heroes, and other people to gain for itself some kind of identity through association.

There is much more that could be said about all this, but for purposes of the present discussion we note that the problem is not the existence of Ego, but its formation in the context of conditional love. A whole system of mental and emotional programming develops to cope with the fear, shame, distrust, and resentment which ensue from being loved conditionally. This system, not the Ego, is what goes by the name false self. Because it pervades the consciousness of the Ego, and many aspects of the unconscious as well, the false self system of programming needs to be understood if we are to become disentangled from it.