

Ego

There is a Hassidic story about a certain rabbi who was leading services for *Yom Kippur*, the Day of Atonement. *Yom Kippur* services are very long and intense, filled with language of remorse and repentance for one's sins. *Yom Kippur* is also a twenty-five hour fast, so the effect is to really bring one to a state of *bittul*- a kind of deflating or nullification of one's self-sense and purification from arrogance.

As this rabbi was *davening* (praying) with great intensity toward the climax of the service, he suddenly became overwhelmed with the realization of his own insignificance. He actually experienced, for a moment, a total dropping of his ego. He realized with embarrassment how deluded he had become. Before he knew what he was doing, he spontaneously cried out, "*Ribono Shel Olam!* Master of the universe! I am nothing! I am nothing!"

When the *hazzan*, the cantor, saw him do this, he too became inspired. The sincerity of the rabbi's cry combined with the intensity of the holy day shot through him, and he suddenly realized the same thing. "*Ribono Shel Olam!* I am nothing! I am nothing!" cried the *hazzan*.

The truth was infectious. Suddenly, a poor congregant, *Shmuyel* the shoemaker, also became deeply moved and cried out as well: "*Ribono Shel Olam!* I am nothing! I am nothing!" When the *hazzan* saw *Shmuyel's* enthusiasm, he turned to the rabbi with incredulity: "Look who thinks he's nothing!"

The irony of this story, of course, is that the *hazzan* becomes arrogant about being humble! And this is the great trick of the ego- the ego can turn anything into itself, even the idea of being egoless. That is why it is so important to understand what the ego is if we wish to maintain right intention, which really means egoless intention.

The *Tanya* outlines the basic qualities of ego (called in the *Tanya* the *Nefesh Behamit*, or "Animal Soul") in terms of the "four mystical elements"- fire, water, air and earth. These four "elements", which take their names from physical phenomena, are really inner qualities of consciousness that have both ego and spiritual manifestations. If you can understand and remember these qualities in real life situations, you can learn to identify ego within yourself and not be controlled by it. When you free yourself from the control of the ego, what is left is right intention. So the key to cultivating *kavanah* is first to understand the source of wrong intention- the ego.

According to the *Tanya*, the egoic quality of fire is arrogance and anger. The *Tanya* points out that arrogance is actually the cause of anger, because anger results from things happening which go against our will. It is only because we arrogantly believe that things *should* go according to our will that we feel conflict, and from that conflict anger is born. So fire represents negativity and conflict with what is. It is the most aggressive and nasty face of ego.

On the other hand, the spiritual quality of fire is the opposite- presence, awareness, and wisdom. Just as fire shines its light outward and illuminates everything around it, so the inner quality of fire is being aware of things as they are, not as you wish them to be. In this simple awareness, without judgment or struggle, one can act with wisdom. Acting with wisdom means first respecting things as they are, and then dancing in relationship with what is, rather than trying to control or manipulate. This is the illumination of fire.

The egoic quality of water is desire and craving for gratification. While ego fire is about what you *don't* want, ego water is about what you *do* want. Craving for sensual pleasures, wealth, fame, success- these are all examples of water. The *Tanya* points out that water is the symbol for craving because it is the nature of craving to continuously grow, and water causes living things to grow. When we get something we want, we may feel satisfied temporarily, but sooner or later there is always something else to want. And, the more we satisfy a particular desire, the more we crave. The extreme example of this is addiction. While fire keeps us in conflict with what we don't want, water keeps us running after what we do want. These two egoic forces are the flipside of each other, keeping a person trapped in a state of restless discontent.

The spiritual quality of water, on the other hand, is generosity and loving kindness. Rather than seeking gratification outwardly, fullness is felt inwardly. This fullness "overflows" as the desire to give, for its own sake. While fire is awareness and presence with, water is the expression of this presence in loving service.

Egoic earth represents fear, anxiety, sloth and ultimately depression. While egoic fire and water keep a person dissatisfied and restless, at least the person is active and functional. With egoic earth, a person's mind becomes polluted with constant thoughts about how bad everything is; instead of getting angry, a person becomes anxious, fearful and unmotivated. If something bad is always bound to happen, what's the point? Why even try? This is the negative energy of earth. If a person gets taken over by this energy, one can become psychologically paralyzed and non-functional, God forbid.

The positive side of earth, however, is consistency, perseverance and willingness to do what is necessary. It is the ability to be very practical- “down to earth”- in order to get things done. While the spiritual side of fire and water provide the inner motivation for action, earth is the ability to follow through with action and not be thwarted by obstacles.

Egoic air represents meaningless activity. It is the tendency to always be busy with something, to not know how to relax. Externally, this could manifest as constant chattiness or jokiness, gossip and discomfort with silence. Internally, it manifests as a busy mind, always churning with thoughts about this and that. It is related to the slang term “air head”, because it is the craving for superficiality, for constant entertainment. Imagine someone talking incessantly with the television on in the background- that is air.

This air quality is unique among the four elements. On one hand, it doesn't carry much of an emotional charge with it, as the other three do. In this sense, it is easier to master in any given moment. Once you are angry, depressed or craving something, it usually takes time to free yourself from those feelings. A busy mind, however, can often be cleared almost completely by taking a few deep, conscious breaths. While maintaining a quiet mind takes more practice, clearing the mind for a few moments is almost effortless. In this sense, the air quality is more superficial and easier to deal with.

On the other hand, mastering the air quality has profound consequences for the other three. In a sense, it is the gateway to the other three. This is because all of the qualities are fed by thought; thought is the “food” which causes the other three qualities to grow. If you can master your thoughts, you have access to the master switch that ultimately controls all four of the “elements”. In the *Tanya*, this is expressed in the phrase, “the mind controls the heart”. Later, we will explore this in greater depth.

Different people tend toward one or more of these egoic qualities; you may notice that some of these qualities are stronger in your personality while others are weaker. However, all of the egoic qualities are actually expressions of the same root: *resistance to what is*. It is easy to see this in the case of anger- something happens that you don't like, so you become angry. The anger is a direct expression resistance. But desire and craving are also resistance to what is. Rather than be satisfied with what you have now, you want something more. Similarly, anxiety and depression are resistance to one's lack of control; rather than simply accepting how things are, the mind comments with negative and judgmental stories about it- more resistance to what is.

Freedom, in the spiritual sense, means freedom from the ego. It means freedom from these four basic egoic qualities and their root, which is resistance. The first step in awakening this freedom is to simply *realize that the ego is not really who you are*. Yes, these qualities may be very strong at times, seemingly irresistible. They are part of you, but they are not *essentially* you. Let's look at the example of your physical body. Your hands are part of you. But what happens if you were to lose your hands? Would you cease to be you? Of course not- you are still essentially yourself, even without your hands. What about if you lost your arms? Your legs? The truth is, your body is not essentially who you are. As long as there is enough body to keep you alive, you remain yourself.

Analogously, when we speak of the ego, we are talking about particular qualities in your personality. Just like the physical body, these qualities are not the essential you. The proof of this is that they come and go. Another proof is that you can perceive them; you can notice, "oh, there is a feeling of anger", or "there is a desire for something". If you can perceive it, it is external to you.

So what is the real you? The real you is the one perceiving everything else; the real you is awareness itself. Through the awakening of awareness as you true self, the egoic qualities can be transmuted into their spiritual counterparts, called *midot*- or "qualities". This is what spiritual transformation is all about- the blossoming of your *midot* through the transmutational power of your awareness.

Questions

1. What is the Hebrew word for "nullification of self-sense and purification from arrogance"?
2. Why is the opening story funny?
3. Please briefly list the ego qualities of the four elements.
4. What is the "real you" according to this text? Do you agree with it?