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Q&A: Ego vs. Will and the Meaning of Self-Study



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5 min.

Isn't a strong ego a requirement for success in anything, including spiritual practice? Often people think they need a strong ego to live successfully in the world and to be successful in their spiritual endeavors. This is not true. We cannot be successful in either the external world or the internal world while we are tossed about by a powerful ego. What success in both realms requires is a strong will.

The difference between ego and will is that the ego is blind, while the will has vision. Will has its source in the pure Self. Ego springs from a false sense of identification (*avidya*) with the external world, and is usually concerned with preserving self-image and self-identity. Ego is characterized by stubbornness, selfishness, and an unwillingness to compromise.

The ego is like a little pool. An egotistical person crouches in that little pool like a frog—his world is small, his borders insecure. He has only a vague awareness of the grove of trees surrounding his pool, and he cannot even imagine the frog-filled marshes just beyond. From his perspective, only his own feelings and voice are meaningful.

But the power of will is like a spring whose source is the Pure Being. It infuses the mind and body with enthusiasm, courage, curiosity, and the energy to act. In yogic literature this force—the intrinsic power of the soul—is called *iccha shakti*, and it is from this force that all the various aspects of our personality, including the ego, receive the energy to carry out their activities.

Achieving success in the world requires a strong will, and that strong will needs to be properly guided so that we may develop a strong personality rather than a trivial, egotistical one. A strong personality exhibits tolerance and endurance. It has the power to vanquish and punish an opponent, but forgives and forgets instead. When we are egotistical, on the other hand, we demonstrate our weakness by answering a

pebble with a cannon. We lose our composure the moment our feelings receive even the mildest bruise. We have a hard time forgetting the injuries we have received from others, and an even harder time remembering how much we have hurt others.

The stronger the ego, the bigger the hurdle it will create. The solution, however, is not to kill the ego or even to weaken it. Rather, we should do our best to purify, transform, and guide it properly. We can do this by employing both our intelligence and our power of discrimination.

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In other words, when we meditate, practice contemplation, pray, study the scriptures, and seek the company of the wise, we make our ego purer and less confined, and this in turn inspires us to move one step ahead. From here, the purified ego, accompanied by a sharpened intellect, gets a glimpse of the next level of awareness, and naturally aspires to reach it. Thus the ego becomes the tool for purifying and expanding itself, and in this way the petty ego begins its journey toward an expanded, more purified ego.

Along the way it becomes increasingly apparent that this journey must end with the ego dissolving and becoming one with the pure Self. As the ego of a dedicated seeker merges with the Infinite, all confusion disappears, the veil of duality lifts, and the seeker sees the whole universe within. Such an aspirant has all the necessary qualifications for becoming a “seer.”

Some texts say *svadhyaya*—self-study—is a complete path. It is one of the essential components of spiritual discipline outlined in the *Yoga Sutra*. I wonder how a person can reach the goal just by studying, and how this study differs from taking a philosophy course? The word *svadhyaya* means “study of the self by oneself, or by pondering on the scriptures.” Practically speaking, it means doing *japa* (repetition) of the revealed mantras that we receive from a teacher through initiation and contemplating the instructions we receive from our teacher or those which are expounded in the authentic scriptures.

Often we commit ourselves to a spiritual discipline without having enough knowledge about ourselves, our goals, and the means by which we are trying to accomplish them. Because of this, when obstacles begin to surface during our

practice we become discouraged. Because we lack sufficient knowledge, we often fail even to recognize the obstacles.

Once we have recognized them, we do not know how to overcome the obstacles because we do not know their cause. We become frustrated and disheartened, and blame the practice, the teacher, and ourselves. By incorporating svadhyaya into our daily practice, we acquire the ability to detect the obstacles before they surface.

For example, by studying the experiences of previous aspirants as set forth in the scriptures and relating these stories to ourselves, we learn to recognize our own strengths and weaknesses. Studying the scriptures helps us understand that the obstacles confronting us are the same obstacles that have confronted seekers through the ages. It may also help us detect obstacles that are lying in wait for us before they manifest, so we can avoid them altogether.

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Furthermore, the scriptures give us clear guidelines for self-analysis, self-observation, and self-reflection. They set forth a systematic way of looking at life and its circumstances and gaining a clear vision of spiritual goals. Those who practice svadhyaya come to know the trivial nature of worldly pleasures, and inspired by scriptural doctrines, they long for everlasting joy. Aspirants who do not practice svadhyaya, however, run the risk of developing a pessimistic attitude toward the world and living an empty and meaningless life even though they are engaged in spiritual practice. Svadhyaya works like a living counselor within.

Self-study also strengthens our conviction that the practice we have undertaken is noble and valid. Through self-study, as the *Yoga Sutra* tells us, we come closer to the *Ishta Deva* (the unique name and form of our chosen representative of the divine), for svadhyaya infuses our practice with divine awareness. That is what helps our practice become “spiritual.” Without it, the practice of japa, for example, turns into a purely mental exercise. It is svadhyaya that opens the channel of *bhakti* (love and devotion) and thereby brings sweetness to the practice. Without this awareness, the practice becomes dry and mechanical.

In the *Yoga Sutra*, svadhyaya has been placed between *tapas* and *Ishvara pranidhana*. Tapas means “austerity or discipline.” It consists of dietary observations, physical

exercises, mental restraints, and exercising control over our thoughts and feelings. Ishvara pranidhana means “surrender to God, or offering the fruits of our actions to the Divine Being,” the spiritual master of all subsequent masters.

Unless the gap between tapas and Ishvara pranidhana is filled with svadhyaya, tapas is merely penance—physical and psychological torture—and Ishvara pranidhana is mere religious sentiment. Self-study gives meaning to both; it transforms tapas into self-commitment and Ishvara pranidhana into spiritual ecstasy.

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