

The Man with Two Heads

An interview with Dr Robert Frager by Craig Hamilton

"Two interviews? Sure. You could call it 'conversations with a schizophrenic,'" the voice on the other end of the line chuckled warmly, "because I'll probably contradict myself. When I'm wearing my Sufi hat, I often say terrible things about psychology."

It was an early fall afternoon - the first day of school at the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology (Palo Alto, California) - and Dr. Robert Frager, the school's founding president, was in good form. Having called the soft-spoken professor with a proposal I was almost sure would be met with at least some hesitation - to interview him twice about the same subject - I was glad to find my unorthodox idea landing on what seemed to be receptive ground. From his comments, it was clear that we weren't the first to have pondered the seemingly unbridgeable gap between the two sides of this human-potential pioneer's life.

To the many students and faculty members of the progressive academic institution he helps guide, Dr. Frager is a dedicated teacher, a Harvard-trained psychologist and the author of, among other works, the psychology textbook *Personality and Personal Growth*. To the twenty or so members of the Redwood City, California, branch of the Halveti-Jerrahi order of Sufis, however, he is Sheikh Ragip, or "Baba," the man whose hand they kiss, whose words they revere and obey and whose life they seek to emulate - their spiritual guide.

Prior to this issue, we had been aware of Dr. Frager's pioneering work in the field of transpersonal psychology and of his role in establishing one of the country's first institutions dedicated to this emerging field of research and practice. Yet it was only when, in the midst of our research into Sufism's teachings on ego, a review copy of his new book, *Heart, Self and Soul: The Sufi Psychology of Growth, Balance, and Harmony*, arrived in our mailbox, that we began to learn of his role as a spiritual leader in this deeply devotional Turkish branch of Sufism. We were immediately intrigued. How was it, we wondered, that one man could stand so firmly in two worlds that - at least where the ego is concerned - seemed, well, worlds apart? Having spent at that point several months exploring both spiritual and psychological perspectives on the ego, it had become undeniably clear that while Sufism and psychology have both dedicated themselves to the study of the nature and workings of the ego, they have come to wildly different conclusions about both what it is and the role that it plays on the path to wholeness.

To the God-intoxicated sheikhs and dervishes [practitioners] of Sufism, the ego has always been public enemy number one. Indeed, among all the wisdom traditions of the world, Sufism, the thousand-year-old mystical branch of Islam, may (with the possible exception of Orthodox Christianity) hold the fiercest stance of any regarding the nature and treatment of this timeless foe of the spiritual life. Known in Arabic as the *nafs al-ammara* or "self commanding or inciting to evil," this "rebellious," "tyrannical" aspect of the self is considered by many Sufi masters to be "harsher than Satan" in its capacity to

drive the spiritual practitioner away from the path. In its endeavour to prove and maintain our separation from and superiority over others, Sufis hold, the cunning, deceitful and ever resourceful ego - "the greatest veil between us and God" - will go to any length necessary to deter us from progressing spiritually - a fact that many Sufis feel warrants often extreme counterforce.

In part, of course, this vast ideological gulf can be attributed to a difference in the way these two camps define their terms. Pride, narcissism and attachment to self-image don't automatically translate to character, "functional center" and healthy sense of self. Yet, definitions aside, what is undeniably clear is that in the major schools of Western psychology, the notion that there is an "enemy" within us that seeks to actively undermine our spiritual development or that it is our very attachment to an identity that must ultimately be relinquished if we are to reach our full potential does not exactly find a receptive hearing. Indeed, even in the pioneering field of "transpersonal psychology" where mystical wisdom and developmental theory have recently become bedfellows, one is much more likely to find discussion of the ways and means of "healing the wounded ego" and "accepting ourselves as we are" than of the need for absolute renunciation in the face of the ego's insidious and unrelenting barrage of temptations. Indeed, wherever the psychological paradigm is allowed reign, the implicit or explicit goal seems to be one of healing rather than transcending, of repairing the self rather than losing the self altogether.

In light of the apparently irreconcilable aims of these two approaches to human development, we wondered how Dr. Robert Frager/Sheikh Ragip - a man whose life and work seemed passionately and perhaps equally dedicated to both - would reckon with the always tricky terrain the ego presents. How could these two approaches really come together in one man? Would he indeed be the "schizophrenic" he'd warned us we'd meet? Or would he, like others in his field, have worked out a way to somehow combine the two views into a unifying "theory of everything"? And if he had, would it be a truly happy marriage?

Intrigued at the unusual opportunity that had presented itself, we travelled to California and spoke with Dr. Robert Frager, across a conference table at the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology and with Sheikh Ragip, during an evening gathering at his Persian-decorated Sufi Center outside Palo Alto. The result was a fascinating exploration of the lives and views of one of the human potential movement's leading innovators, illuminating both the depth and wisdom of two powerful traditions and the subtle and often confusing territory that reveals itself when they attempt to find common ground.

Interview

What Is Enlightenment (WIE): *In addition to your role as a Sufi sheikh, you're also the founding president of a progressive academic institution devoted to transpersonal psychology. You mentioned to me previously that you are in some ways a very different person in your two different roles, and that as a result, you often even contradict yourself. In particular you said that when wearing your Sufi hat you often say terrible things about psychology, your chosen profession. Can you speak a little bit about your experience of the conflict between these two worlds?*

Robert Frager: One way of putting the problem is that in using the term “psychology” in an academic setting, in an institution that offers a Ph.D. degree, we’re taking on the whole Western academic tradition with its emphasis on head alone - certainly not heart, much less soul. If you break apart the very term “psychology,” “psyche” means spirit or soul in Greek; and therefore, psychology or psychoanalysis is literally the scientific analysis, the logical cutting up, or parsing, of the soul, which in itself is pretty crazy. How in the hell do you parse the soul? How can you be analytic when it comes to the soul?

When you even use the term “psychology,” you’re buying into something that says logic will do it. But logic is a very limited tool. Certainly, logic has caused me to make a lot of wrong decisions in my life. And in Sufism, as soon as you get to the higher stages, forget logic. It doesn’t figure anymore because you have a paradox; what is that soul in you that’s transcendent? What is before the before? And after the after? These are not questions logic is ever going to handle

So I think psychology can only take one so far. And I think the problem with much of modern science and technology, including psychology, is that it doesn’t know its own limits. Huston Smith, who had the fascinating experience of being a professor of philosophy and religion at the “Temple of Science,” MIT, wrote beautifully about this. He said there’s the huge night sky, which is this vast array of stars and things that you can’t see with the naked eye. And science is taking one searchlight and illuminating one piece. The problem with science is that it says, “Everything we didn’t illuminate doesn’t count.” So one of the problems with psychology, like much of modern academic science, is that it doesn’t really acknowledge the value of where it doesn’t go - which is to issues of the heart, to issues of ultimate meaning and value, to issues of the spirit.

Now, psychology does some things wonderfully. I’ve often spoken with Muslim psychologists, colleagues who’ve said to me, “As a Muslim, should I even be *dealing* with Western psychology? Isn’t it a distortion from our point of view as religious men and women?” And generally I’ve said, “Look, notice that the whole clinical field in psychology is really the psychology of the lower levels of the *nafs* [ego or lower self].” That’s all it is. It’s very valuable. In fact it teaches us some things about the *nafs* that we wouldn’t know otherwise. The Sufi tradition, for example, doesn’t talk about some of these fascinating defense mechanisms of the psyche - like repression or projection, the things that Freud and Anna Freud and the neo-Freudians laid out. Understanding this is very valuable. But if you think that’s all the psyche is, that’s absurd.

WIE: *It seems to be a common view among transpersonal psychologists that before we can truly begin the work of abandoning the ego, it is essential that we first develop a strong ego. Indeed, ever since psychiatrist and meditation teacher Jack Engler first put forth the statement “You have to be somebody before you can be nobody,” this idea has come to be regarded as almost the first commandment of the transpersonal psychological field. I recently read Engler’s statement to the Christian Orthodox elder Archimandrite Dionysios, and he responded, “That’s like saying you have to become the head of the Mafia before you can become president!” What is your view on this?*

Fragar: They’re both right. I’ve noticed, and I’m sure this is true in Greece, the spiritual traditions in general don’t take children of one year old or even five years old into a monastery. But why don’t the ashrams, the monasteries, take kids in at birth if they really believe that the kids should be surrounded by spiritual beings and by spiritual discipline, instead of being surrounded by the worldly life? It seems to me that one reason is to give them a chance to develop their personalities, develop their likes and dislikes, mature enough so that they come to the monastery with a personality - even though, interestingly, that personality is developed in the world. You have to let them be in the world and develop to a certain extent, because only then do they have a real vocation and can they make a reasonable choice. In other words, they have developed their egos, they have developed their personalities to some extent.

My former teacher Kennett Roshi once put it this way; she said, “If you look at the Buddhist iconography, there’s a picture of Maitreya, the Buddha to come, sitting on a giant beast. He’s larger than the beast - bigger, weightier, stronger. He hasn’t killed the beast but he *sat on it*, controlled it.” And that beast is the ego. I think that is the goal. The goal is not to kill the ego. It’s not to have no personality, but it’s to sit on it and to be bigger than it is. Now, sitting on it isn’t beating it or starving it. It’s sitting on it. I mean the ego might say, “I’m being abused.” But then who believes it? The goal is to somehow have developed yourself as a spiritual being so that the ego is a small part of you but a developed part.

Now I think Engler’s statement can certainly be misinterpreted to mean: “Well, I have to work *just* on developing my ego now.” My guess is the best way to do it is you work on developing your ego in the context of sitting on it. You don’t just go, “Let me feed this beast and let it go free and then by the time it’s really grown I’m going to have a hell of a time taming it.” That’s pretty dumb! What you do is feed and love the beast, but you train it as you’re nourishing it with love, with understanding.

WIE: *So you’re saying that whatever aspects of self need to be developed to grow spiritually can all be developed in the context of spiritual pursuit?*

Fragar: Yes. I think developing ego out of the context of spirituality, where it’s just pandering to the ego, is a foolish mistake.

WIE: *You've been speaking about ego in a number of different ways. One thing we've observed in the course of our research for this issue is that "ego" is a word that has traditionally been used differently by psychological theorists than it has been by the spiritual traditions. Whereas spiritual traditions have tended to use the word "ego" to refer to the enemy of the path, the compulsion to maintain and preserve at all costs our separate sense of self, our identity, Western psychology generally refers to it in positive terms as either our personality or as a set of capacities or functions that we need to live effectively in the world. Yet transpersonal psychology, in its attempt to bring psychology and spirituality together, often seems to blur this distinction by referring to the ego at times as an obstacle that needs to be transcended and at other times as simply the personality. Isn't it essential, however, if we really want to be victorious in our quest for liberation that we know exactly what the obstacle we must face really is, and that we keep a stark vision of the negative ego - the enemy of the path - firmly in our sights?*

Fragar: Well let me seem to not answer this. I think, from a Sufi perspective, one very important component of the struggle to develop oneself spiritually is service - service to humanity but also service to the world, to all of creation. One of the great tools to do that is the personality structure, including the ego, the sense of self. Now even as you're working to divest yourself of that separate sense of self, which is the last stage, in order to get there, paradoxically, you need to use that self well. It is the beast on which the Buddha rides. If you look at the Mahayana Buddhist tradition, when you go through the experience of nirvana, you go through the experience of union and dropping all separateness. But you come back to serve. In the classic ten ox-herding pictures, the last image is returning to the world with "bliss-bestowing hands" - which means *with* your personality structure. But the difference is that your personality is firmly under your control. It's a tool that you use. It's not the master.

WIE: *So in this sense we're speaking about the ego as personality as opposed to identity or attachment to self-image?*

Fragar: Well, ego is an essential part of personality. It's not all of personality, but certainly when you say "I," that's a part of your personality, the core around which the personality is built. The individual personality is built on this funny delusion that we're separate. It's built around: "Who am I?" and "What have I done?" "What motivations do I have?" "What desires do I have?" "What relationships do I have?" There's a weird presumption in there that there's an "I" having relationships, there's an "I" having desires. It's a linchpin for the whole personality.

WIE: *But it seems that the ego that the spiritual traditions are trying to get rid of is very specifically the ego as identity, the insistence that "I have to know who I am all the time, and I'm going to distort reality at any cost in order to see myself the way I want to see myself, in order to preserve this solid tangible notion of me." This seems - at least potentially - to be something very distinct from the personality itself.*

Fragar: But that notion of a separate "I," a separate "me" - if you pull that out, there's not much personality left to hang on. What's there?

WIE: *Well, as you mentioned earlier, and this has also been my experience of the greatest masters I've known: as that need to have a separate sense of self, that need to know who we are, drops away, the personality becomes filled with something else. So there's still a personality; there's a structure there. But it's no longer driven by a compulsion of anxiety and fear around preserving an identity. That's gone, and what's left is a fully human expression of something sacred.*

Fragar: There is a personality there, but developmentally that personality initially formed around a sense of separate self. I'm saying that at a certain point, the sense of self is essential in human development. You don't develop without it. I mean without that sense of self we'd probably be feral humans without a lot of intelligence.

In the course of development I think many of the great saints have developed a personality. They have developed a way of understanding and relating to people. And then it gets transformed, but there is still a structure there that allows them to understand the problems of people who come to them. So I agree with you that the personality ultimately becomes a structure that's imbued with the Divine and it doesn't have the capacity to throw one off, to distort in the way it used to. But I think, developmentally, that structure did grow up from a sense of "I," from the ego. In the course of normal development, one develops an ego and develops a personality structure. And ideally in the course of normal *spiritual* development, one transcends them.

But I do think that to pander to ego growth is absolutely wrong. On the other hand, to avoid it is wrong. I think the real answer is to hold that growth in the context of the spiritual. It's tricky because we are talking about two different levels. One is the normal maturation and growth of the ego. But at the same time that's not all that's going on. There's another level. There's something far greater going on here. All of this is in a larger context. This maturation and growth are happening but there's a larger whole that that's part of. It may have been Jung who said, "The problem with ego is that it wants to be the center of consciousness. It pretends to be the center of the whole psyche, of everything." So if you say, "Grow, but you're only a part of consciousness, don't get inflated. You're useful, but you're not the president of this system. There is this greater Self and we may not see it clearly now, but it's really what we're going to connect with eventually." That, I think, is one way of seeing how these two aspects fit together. It's a matter of context.

WIE: *It seems that one of the chief aims of transpersonal psychology is to bring together the insights of Western psychology and the wisdom of the spiritual traditions. But are the traditions really deficient in some way? To be complete, does Sufism need to be augmented by the ego-supporting methodologies of psychology? Do you think, for instance, that your own spiritual teacher, Sheikh Muzaffer, would have been a more enlightened man and a better master if he had undergone Western psychotherapy or been exposed to Western psychological perspectives?*

Frager: You're asking someone who is quite biased about this. I don't think he would have been a better man or attained a higher level of spirituality had he undergone psychoanalysis, although there is a famous saying in Sufism: "Those who know themselves, know their Lord." And certainly, psychoanalysis is one very powerful way of knowing *some* things about ourselves. My sense is that his full education as a Sufi went so deep that he attained a level of self-understanding and spirituality that was complete in some ways. However, he might have been a better spiritual guide for others had he known more about Western psychology. I'm not sure.

WIE: *Why do you say that?*

Frager: Well, to understand some of the mechanisms of distortion that his students were still stuck in, it may have helped for him to understand projection, rationalization, and the process of repression. However, my experience of him was that he understood the depths of the psyche intuitively in a way that was extraordinarily powerful and direct, and in a way that theoretical constructs might very well have distorted or inhibited. I felt so deeply *seen* by him and *known* by him, and I would guess that chances are that might have been somewhat distorted by personality theory. It was a kind of direct knowing, and I think when you put theory between the fact of knowing and the object that you're knowing, it tends to distort it.

I had a wonderful teacher, Moshe Feldenkrais, who is an incredible teacher of movement and bodily functioning. He could work directly with anyone - from those with the most severe physical handicap limitations from accidents and birth defects, all the way up to great athletes and musicians - to improve their functioning. And he said, "When I'm working with someone, I don't even *think* in sentences. Because the structure of grammar would get between my nervous system experiencing the nervous system of the person I'm touching."

*This concludes the excerpts from part one, the interview with Dr Frager.
Part two, the interview with Sheikh Ragip, will be forthcoming.*