

The Man With Two Heads - Part Two

An interview with Sheikh Ragip (Dr Robert Frager) by Craig Hamilton

What Is Enlightenment (WIE): *What is Ego?*

SHEIKH RAGIP: It's interesting that when Freud's writing was translated into English, what was translated as "the ego" is in German "*das Ich*" which means "the I." So our modern theories of personality are built on this notion that ego is the "I"; it's my sense of who I am, and Sufism would very much agree with this definition. Sufism explains that this sense of self, what it calls the "personal soul," is an outgrowth of our capacity to objectify ourselves, to see ourselves as objects. Now, our capacity to do that gives us tremendous power to act, to plan; it gives us tremendous control. But the problem is that when you begin to say, "There is an 'I.' Here *I* am, an object," then by definition you're also separating yourself from the world. If I say, "I" or "me," that immediately assumes dualism. Because there's "I," therefore there has to be "other." But from the Sufi point of view, we're seeking unity - and that dualism, which is so powerful, is one of the greatest blocks to attaining unity. Who wants to give up "I"? We don't want to give ourselves up; we're *terribly* attached to this sense of "who *I* am".

So, fundamentally, the roots of the ego are this sense of separateness or individuality. We identify with this separateness instead of identifying with the soul, instead of identifying with the divine in us. To the extent that we are attached to our self-content or self-image or separateness, that is one of the things that keeps us from truly pursuing a spiritual path. It holds us back from our deepest mystical experiences because often in those experiences that sense of a separate self dissolves. One of my old colleagues once said, "Everybody wants God but fights like the devil to avoid union!"

WIE: *In your book Heart, Self and Soul, you also define the ego as "the collection of all those forces within us that lead us off the spiritual path." Is the ego, as you're describing it here, the same as, what in Sufism is called "the tyrannical nafs?"¹*

SR: Yes. In Sufism, the lowest level of the *nafs* or self is the *nafs al-ammara*, or tyrannical *nafs*, which refers to all those forces in us that lead us astray. At that level we are also unconscious of them, in denial that they exist, very much like an addict who says, "I have no problem with alcohol. I just have a little with breakfast, a little with lunch, a little something in between, but I have no problem." It's that denial, that unconsciousness, which makes the tyrannical *nafs* so incredibly powerful. Many of us are in that stage more than we'd like to think. I think it's a stage that one drops into, for example, when somebody cuts you off on the freeway, or when someone is rude, or when someone hooks your pride or makes you angry. We descend to that level of unconsciousness. So it's incredibly powerful.

Now Sufism speaks of the *nafs* as moving through stages or levels, and the second level is called the "self-blaming *nafs*" or the "regretful *nafs*." At this stage, you're more aware of it, but you're still caught by it. It's like, "I know I'm going to say the wrong thing, I hope I can stop . . . oh damn, here I go . . ." and you start the sentence and you *know* you should shut up, but you can't; you just do it. In that particular stage, we at least realize that we're off-center - we're in the grip of something that is not our highest level of consciousness - but we still let ourselves do it even knowing that we're driven.

¹ More commonly referred to as "The Commanding Self".

And then, as we continue to work and see it more clearly, as we try to substitute positive action and meditation on the names of God, which are positive qualities, little by little we ideally weaken those forces and move out of their domination. But even then, these forces can get revved up in certain situations. We may be under control of them ninety-nine percent of the time, but they're still there tempting us, except maybe in the very highest saints.

WIE: *Does that temptation take on different forms as one progresses on the path?*

SR: Yes. For instance, if we stay with the stages of the *nafs*, what happens next, after the regretful *nafs*, is that we come to what's called the "inspired *nafs*," the inspired self in which the wisdom of the heart, the wisdom of that inner light, begins to come more and more into the personality, into consciousness, so that we really have an alternative now to the forces of the ego—which is intuition, a sense of guidance, a sense of connection to truth. The problem is that the lower forces are still somewhat in action. The reign of the ego is not by any means over, and the biggest danger, of course, is that the ego can begin to use the wisdom and the light for self-aggrandizement, for inflation, rather than for self-diminishment. Ideally, one says, "This light isn't mine, this wisdom isn't mine. It's something that comes through me. It's something from another source". But the ego wants to say, "This is *my* wisdom. I *know*."

There is an interesting book that's just recently out by Mariana Caplan called *Halfway Up the Mountain* - which is a bad metaphor because it's probably an endless mountain - but it talks about many of the dangers of having spiritual teachers who are halfway up the mountain, but have somehow stopped at this stage. It's the most dangerous stage of all because if the ego gets inflated with real wisdom, real light, it's very hard to change things. Because the light is real, the wisdom is real. The only problem is that the ego begins to attribute it to itself, not to something greater than itself. And so the self gets firmer, crystallized even; but what we want, of course, is for the self to become more transparent, less of a "thing," lighter.

WIE: *Sufism has a thousand-year legacy of saints, living embodiments of the divine who have demonstrated with their own lives the possibility of a life that is free from the ego's tyranny. How does the expression of the personality change in an individual who goes beyond the ego?*

SR: They still have their personality, but one way to put it is that the personality doesn't run them. They run their personalities. Another way to put it is that somehow the personality is beautified. It's permeated with light and love. It's still a personality, and it doesn't mean they become generic, like a vanilla shake sheikh. They're all different. But there's a beauty there, because the personality has become like a vessel that holds the Divine. Like a clay pot that soaks up its contents, in holding the Divine, the personality becomes permeated with the divine qualities of love, light, generosity and divine compassion. And also, to push the metaphor, it doesn't leak anymore.

One of my teachers once said, "If you haven't got your basic life in order and have not begun to live a life of calmness, stability, service, honesty, practicing the basic virtues and then you meditate or do other spiritual practices, it's like having a cow that eats organic grass and gives wonderful organic milk, but when you milk that cow, the milk goes into a pail with a couple of small holes in the bottom." Terribly wasteful! You probably never get to use that milk. The personality is very much like that pail. Certain habits like dishonesty or lack of calmness are like holes that make it so we can't hold the state of love of the Divine. We lose it. And the great ones don't.

WIE: *Throughout Sufi literature, the ego is often characterized as a kind of willful part of the psyche that actively opposes our spiritual progress. What is the driving force behind the ego's agenda? What is the raison d'être of the ego?*

SR: Well, there are probably two answers. One is self-survival. The ego is scared of change, scared to death of deep mystical experience and transformation, because from its point of view, that kind of change is death. It doesn't think it's going to survive it. And it may not. So it's a survival mechanism. It is the part of all of us that wants to stay the same, a kind of inertial component in all of us that says, "Don't change."

Another aspect is that the ego is often talked about by the Sufis as connected to Satan, to the devil. And it's interesting, Jung says much the same thing about the shadow. On the one hand, it's that which we don't see or accept in ourselves, but he also says that it's connected with larger cosmic forces, what we call "Satanic forces." And no one likes to talk about this. It's not real popular. In fact I'm teaching a course in spiritual psychology to one of the new religious groups that is very focused on positive thinking, and whenever I bring this up, it's like I've poked one of their sacred cows. "How can you say evil exists? The universe is good, God is good!" And part of me tries to say, "Wait a minute. Whenever there's light, there's shadow."

It also seems like it's not inaccurate to occasionally refer to the *nafs* almost as though it is motivated, like a person. On one level it's a metaphor, but on another level, there's also a sense that it seems to act like an entity. Sheikh Tosun Bayrak has often referred to the *nafs* as "the thief," something that wishes to steal away that which is beautiful and valuable in our lives. It's almost as if it's a servant of Satan whose job is to test our faith. In fact, sometimes he has said to us as well, "Be especially careful after you've been on *Hajj* [pilgrimage to Mecca], after you've really done some spiritual work, because thieves usually don't go to empty houses, but if there's something there . . ." When you grow, when you change, in a sense almost a counterforce can be activated.

WIE: *How does Sufism recommend that we guard ourselves against this undermining force within our own psyche?*

SR: One way that Sheikh Tosun has spoken about this is: "What do you do when a thief comes into the house at night and you're in your bedroom, and you hear this thief creeping around, you hear the candlesticks going into his bag? If you charge downstairs with a knife in your hand, the thief will also have a knife. If you have a gun in your hand, the thief will have a gun. No matter what you've got in the house, the thief is going to have the same. It's going to mirror that power that you use against it, and it's going to be terribly destructive." So what do you do? The answer that he gave is, "You turn the light on!" Because the thief is a coward, and if you turn the light of awareness on the process, the thief will flee. You don't fight. You see, the stupidest thing in the world is to fight with Satan. There are lots of great stories in Sufism and elsewhere that show that when you try to fight with Satan, guess who wins? It's a very bad idea.

I think the problem is what *we* tend to do when we hear "holy war" - it's too easy for it to become black and white. In a war, you know who your allies are and you know who your enemies are. But the spiritual path is much more subtle. The *nafs* never says to you, "I am your enemy. I'm going to mislead you from your spiritual path. I want you to meditate a little less. I want you to do your work a little less. I want to nail you!" It doesn't do that. It says something like, "You've been traveling, so why don't you take it easy. Don't exhaust yourself; get a little more sleep. It's good for your health. I'm your friend. I have your best interests at heart." So this business is complicated.

WIE: *Earlier you mentioned that the ego can appear to get stronger in response to our spiritual efforts. In Heart, Self and Soul, you also describe how your first conscious experience of the tyrannical nafs, or negative ego, in yourself came immediately upon your decision to formally ask to become a dervish [Sufi initiate]. Why is it that when one deepens one's commitment to the spiritual quest, the ego seems to become more visible?*

SR: Well, I think most people, especially before they take up the spiritual quest, are absolutely under the domination of the tyrannical *nafs*. But if we use the metaphor of the pharaoh, the inner tyrant: Who is the best ruler? It's not the ruler who has to call the troops out to keep order. It's the ruler who gives commands and everybody says, "We *must* obey." It's the ruler whose authority isn't questioned. And so it seems to me that *until* one gets onto the spiritual path, the ruler has it easy, because there's no opposition. There's no rebellion. But when we start on the spiritual path, there *is* a rebellion and then what happens is that, in a way, the forces of the tyrannical *nafs* that have been underground, that have been hiding, suddenly become revealed. That revealing is actually a weakening of their power because they're no longer unconscious. But what happens is that, paradoxically, very often when you start on the spiritual path, you suddenly see the power of the *nafs*, and you think, "Oh, my God! I'm in much worse shape than I thought I was." The problem is, you just didn't know what bad shape you were in before. You were run by this thing. You weren't fighting it. So when you first see it, there's a shock.