

What is Ego?

There are lots of sophisticated psychological definitions of “ego,” but the way I like to think of it is just this vague sense of “me-ness” – the “me” that’s separate from the rest of the world.

In spiritual circles there's lots of talk about getting rid of the ego, and how that's the goal of spirituality: to be without self – “no-self.” But, when we actually go looking for ego, it's surprisingly hard to find. It's never been uncovered during an autopsy or surgery. It's never been found. It's actually just a set of beliefs that we have about ourselves that, in the absence of a thorough investigation, feels real. There's this very concrete sense of “me.” “Me” that's different from that person over there, “me” that must worry about security, liking this, fearing that, wanting this, not wanting that. All of that relates to this sense of “me.” So, that's what I mean by ego.

The spiritual endeavour to get rid of ego has to presume from the get-go that it's real. And because it's something real, we must somehow expel it from our being. But what if it wasn't real at all? If that were the case, the belief that it was real creates its own reality. It's just like seeing something in the dark, not knowing what it is, creating a story about it and then fear arises directly related to that.

This thing that we've packaged and called “ego” is simply a package of thoughts that we've identified as being solid, being real, somehow, although we're not quite sure how. And the thought that we need to destroy that, to get rid of it, that thought gives ego its reality. But, in truth, ego is just a collection of thoughts about ourselves, about what we are. It's believing that we are the sum total of our thoughts, beliefs, story, situation, function in life, profession, etc. That whole package becomes who we believe we are. We give that thought-belief package identification under the name “ego”, and then because we're “spiritual people” we decide that we have to get rid of that. But we're fighting against something that's not real in the first place.

The real avenue here is not to fight with this sense of “me-ness”, not to try to get rid of it, but just to look deeply as to what might actually be there. Where does this sense of “I” arise from? This was Ramana Maharshi's instruction: ask yourself, “Who am I?”. This investigation forces us to really look at how this whole structure - this whole belief system about what we are - arises, and whether it's real or fundamental to what who we are.

Ramana says, “Let what comes, come; let what goes, go. Find out what remains.” What remains is already beyond ego, is already free, is already conscious. Find out what that is.