

Snuffed Out Spirituality Without Ego

by

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We often use the word *ego* as if it were synonymous with words like “vanity” and “conceit.” One definition describes ego as “an exaggerated sense of your own importance and a feeling of superiority to other people.”¹ Obviously those of us with spiritual inclinations work against such a sense of inflated self-importance in ourselves by adopting practices promoting humility and compassion. If ridding ourselves of ego simply means becoming less selfish and more altruistic, then we’re fine with doing our best not to be so self-centered. But how many of us would be comfortable with going all the way—with completely annihilating our own desires and sense of self? How many of us would be satisfied with a definition of spirituality that says we must abandon our own will, our own dreams, our own wishes and live as if nothing we wanted were important? How many of us are willing to pray, as Thomas Kelly once prayed, “Lord, be Thou my will. Make me as sensitive as a shadow, obedient as a shadow, selfless as a shadow—utterly submitted to you. Be thou my will.”²

Such a notion seems, perhaps, anathema to us westerners who so delight in our heroic stories of the rugged individual and self-made man. If Heaven is our goal, after all, shouldn’t we do everything we can to reach for the stars, to become stars ourselves? And if we are fortunate enough to achieve great heights for ourselves, isn’t our success a sign that we have been rewarded by divine forces for all our efforts. Aren’t wealth, prestige, and power evidence of God’s blessing? Our cultural myth is of the heroic individual who struggles to conquer every obstacle along life’s journey until reaching the top of Mount Olympus and becoming like a God oneself, having earned the right, responsibility, and power to dominate others. To achieve such grandiose heights we must not relinquish our God-given desires, our natural proclivity for self-interest, our natural instinct to improve our species through fierce competition and natural selection. The root of the word *spirit*, after all, is “spire,” indicating that any true spirituality is about doing our best to achieve our highest aspirations, guided instinctually by the divine gift each of us is born with, our own wants and needs.

If this is so, then surely people like Thomas Kelly must be out of their minds! To live our lives so selflessly that our own individuality remains as vague as a shadow, even if it were possible, must be unhealthy. Yet there are other myths in our tradition, like the story of Icarus who flies too high, too close to the Sun, melting his wax wings and plummeting to his death, warning us not let our egos become so inflated that we destroy ourselves in the process. Just as towers fall, economies collapse, and empires crumble, it is possible for our aspirations to get the best of us, to fly too high, too close to the sun. Spiritual teachers like Jesus, who gave up all that he had for others, understand that heaven isn’t something we aspire toward, but is right here, among us, in the way we

relate to each other, with humility and compassion. Heaven isn't about getting what is best for myself, but about giving the best of myself! "One does not need buildings, money, power or status to practice the Way of Harmony." Master Ueshiba explained, because, "Heaven is right where you are standing, and that is the place to train."

But the kind of self-sacrifice they're talking about involves more than merely becoming less selfish and less vain. Freud originally used the word *ego* simply to define the part of us that says "I," not the part of us that says "I'm bigger and better than you are, my needs are more important." In fact, *ego* is simply the Latin word for "I." *Ego* is a personal pronoun. It's most common definition is "the self as distinguished from others." Thus, to live without ego is to live as if we are indistinguishable from others. This is not to say I don't have my own will, my own needs and desires, but that my will, my needs and desires, are no more important than yours. To not have an ego means that I work to make certain your needs are met as much as my own. I am not one person; rather, we are one tribe. Your needs are my needs. Your pain is my pain. If you are treated unjustly, then I'm treated unjustly. When your children are hungry, my children are hungry. We're the same, you and I. Perhaps, in the ideological realm of Heaven it's possible to be above each other, but here on Earth, in the real world, we are the same— indistinguishable! As Meister Eckhart, who saw God in all things and in every action, said, "since God cannot be distracted by the numbers of things, neither can the person, for [the person] is one in One, in which all divided things are gathered up to unity and there undifferentiated."³

Hence, to let go of ego, of I, in the spiritual sense, is not to become co-dependent individuals unable to distinguish our emotions from the emotions of others, but to become incapable of holding ourselves above others. Thomas Kelly, for instance, who prayed to relinquish his will and become as indistinct as a shadow, had, as a Harvard Professor, achieved a high level of accomplishment in his individual career, but never put his own success above the needs of others. Born in Ohio in 1893, this Quaker turned mystic, chose to serve his country during World War I, but not by forsaking his non-violence. He went to England and worked with the YMCA and German prisoners of war, and after the war returned to Berlin to help with its reconstruction. When World War II broke out, he again gave up his career at Harvard and went to Germany to encourage his friends living under Hitler's fascist regime. We see by his example, that Kelly, an accomplished scholar, did not hold himself or his career above the needs of others. He truly was as sensitive, as obedient, and as selfless as a shadow.

Kelly was far from alone in his call for selflessness. Who knows, perhaps his lecture about the selfless shadow, *Holy Obedience*, was inspired by Eckhart's sermon entitled, *Of True Obedience*, in which he said, "Being obedient, if [one] purifies [oneself], God will come into [one] in course; for when [one] has no will of [one's] own, then God will command [one] what God would command for [Godself]."⁴ In other words, giving up ego, killing my "I," doesn't mean I am without will, only that I have taken on the will of something much greater than myself, motivated by something larger than my own

narcissistic needs. “Where I do not choose for myself,” Eckhart said, “God chooses for me.”⁵

Naturally the Christian mystics view this greater will as the will of God, but if it makes us more comfortable we might also liken it to the Higher Self sought after in Hinduism and Buddhism, or to Abraham Maslow’s self-actualized person, or Jung’s individuated self, or Lawrence Kohlberg’s post-conventional phase of moral development, during which one has learned to let go of one’s individual interests in order to uphold universal principles like love, justice, and compassion. Whatever linguistic paradigm works best for us, this theme of letting go of ego, of *I*, of self-interests for the sake of something greater than ourselves, is central to many traditions.

On his way to becoming the Buddha, young Gotama, who was more a humanist than a theologian, came to practice a kind of meditative yoga in which he first cultivated friendship for everything and everyone. Then he empathized with the suffering of all creatures, and felt compassion for every person and being, even grass and insects. Then he allowed himself to feel sympathetic joy by delighting in the happiness of others. Finally, he felt complete equality and equanimity with others. As Karen Armstrong explains, “Gotama was learning systematically to open his whole being to others, and thus transcending the ego in compassion and loving-kindness to all other creatures.”⁶ The state of mind he achieved through this process, *nibbana*, which we have come to call *nirvana*, most accurately translates, “nothing,” and literally means “snuffed out.” This is why, after his enlightenment, Buddha was also called *Tathagata*, which means “gone.” Thus Buddha, who did not accept the traditional Indian belief in *atman*, the eternal self, came to teach about *anatta*, the doctrine of “no self,” which we obtain by letting go of our own desires and living life, instead, in service and compassion toward others.

And if, as the Buddha, also taught, all suffering comes from clinging to our own desires, then the opposite might also be true, that all happiness comes through selflessness. “It is more happy,” as Jesus said, “to give than to receive.” I know this to be true in my own life based on a profound experience of complete selflessness I had briefly as a teenager. I’ve never spoken of it before because it remains the highest state of contentment and happiness, in all my years since, that I’ve ever achieved. To speak of it, I suppose, reminds me of just how large my own ego has grown over the years, and of my failure to obtain such a blessed state of mind again. It happened after reading Thomas Kelly’s work and stumbling upon those profound words with which I began, “Make me as sensitive as a shadow, obedient as a shadow, selfless as a shadow—utterly submitted to you. Be thou my will.”⁷ This imagery, of being a selfless shadow, somehow touched something in my psyche that allowed me to live for several weeks completely unmoved by any desires of my own. Not that they weren’t there, but my own lusts moved through me like light through glass, without judgment, but also without influence.

Surprisingly, what was most beautiful about this experience, was not the sort of egotistical dominion of our passions many of us seek, but the absolute state of bliss through which I experienced the world during this all too brief time. We might tend to think that living without self-will would make the world rather dull and meaningless. But I found the opposite to be true. The world was more wonderful for me then, and life more interesting, than it has ever been since. Though I have had many incredible spiritual experiences since, none compare to my brief time of utter selflessness. I've come to understand through this experience, however, what Buddha meant when he said all suffering is caused by clinging, and the liberation we find when we finally learn to let go. Letting go isn't death, as our ego fears, it's life, it's freedom. This is also what Eckhart understood when he said, "When you are thwarted, it is your own attitude that is out of order. Begin, therefore, first with self and forget yourself! If you do not first get away from self, then whatever else you get away from you will still find obstacles and restlessness."⁸

Still, we might wonder, how letting go of self in this way, we can still find the motivation to want to help anybody. How can we demonstrate compassion for others without, at least, some sense of self? Yet, if we move beyond our anthropocentric paradigm, toward the behavior of other animals, we must soon admit that many other creatures, unencumbered by any the sense of *I* whatsoever, demonstrate loving kindness. In her book, *Beauty in the Beasts*, Kristin Von Kreisler writes of numerous examples of animals that demonstrate compassion. In one study, for example, conducted by researchers at Northwestern University, two rhesus monkeys were taught to obtain their food by pulling a chain. But when the researchers cruelly rigged the chain to shock another group of rhesus monkey's each time it was pulled, they stopped pulling it, which meant going hungry for several days.⁹ In another experiment, a researcher randomly removed differing fish from a tank, got them drunk by placing them briefly in a solution containing alcohol, then returned them to their original tank. To his surprise a sober fish would routinely stay with the drunken fish, taking care of it and protecting it until it sobered up.¹⁰ As Von Kreisler, writes, "I've read of a gorilla who watched a zookeeper smoking and made little cigarettes out of paper and hay, which he generously gave to her as gifts. And I've heard about chimps cleaning another chimp's wounds, licking the blood, shooing flies away, and traveling slowly, so the injured chimp could keep up. Then there's the famous Binti Jua, a gorilla in Brookfield, Illinois Zoo. After a child fell into her enclosure, she picked him up, cradled and protected him, and kindly handed him over to zoo officials."¹¹

Von Kreisler's book, as well as many other sources, is full of examples of animals showing compassion and kindness toward their own species as well as toward others. The point here is that we don't have to have a strong ego to demonstrate compassion. In fact, we don't have to have any ego at all. Indeed, given the behavior of compassion and cooperation demonstrated by creatures without a sense of self, it would seem compassion is a part of nature, and, thus, ought to come to us naturally, instinctually, without any thought at all. It might even be that it is best, as so may spiritual teachers have suggested, that we get our egos out of the picture altogether, precisely so we can let

compassion flow more naturally through us. “A pure heart,” Eckhart said, “is one that is unencumbered, unworried, uncommitted, and which does not want its own way about anything but which, rather, is submerged in the loving will of God, having denied self.”¹³

¹ Encarta World English Dictionary

² Kelly, Thomas R., *Holy Obedience*, William Penn Lecture, delivered at Arch Street Meeting House, Philadelphia, 1939.

³ Blakney, Raymond B., trans., *Meister Eckhart*, Harper & Row Publishers, New York, NY, 1941, p. 8.

⁴ Ibid. p. 3.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Armstrong, Karen, *The Great Transformation*, Alfred P. Knopf, New York, NY, 2006, p. 279.

⁷ Kelly, Thomas R., *Holy Obedience*, William Penn Lecture, delivered at Arch Street Meeting House, Philadelphia, 1939.

⁸ Blakney, *ibid.* p.5.

⁹ Von Kreisler, Kristin, *Beauty in the Beasts*, MJF Books, New York, NY, 2001, p. 50.

¹⁰ Ibid. p. 51

¹¹ Ibid. p. 13.

¹² Blakney, *ibid.* p. 4.