

8

WyngateCare 
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SESSION 7

The Ego

IDENTIFICATION

Answering the question “Who are you?” seems simple. If you ask this question you often get an answer like: “I’m John, 24 years old, I am a manager, I have a nice house in Amsterdam, etc.”. In most cases we get information about the situation in which people find themselves (home, children), what they do (job, hobbies) and/ or what they own (nice house, own business). An important question we can ask is whether such answers really say something about who we are. Am I my possessions, education, title, appearance, my life situation? Is this my true identity? How much does it say about me?

Identification means to identify. It is derived from the Latin “idem” which means “same” and “facere” which means, “make”. So, if I identify with something then “I make the same of it”. The same as what? The same as me. You consider it as an inseparable part of yourself. For example, suppose you identify with your job. In that case, you may feel like your job is the same as the person you are. If you were fired, you could lose a part of yourself. Identification is a product of the mind (thinking).

We can identify with many things:

- Possessions I am what I have; my possessions say something about me. I am worth more because I have a big house, because I own an expensive car, because I always buy specific brands
- Job I am a writer, I’m a doctor, or I’m a garbage man. I’m worth more/less because I have a specific profession
- Appearance I am what I look like. My appearance says who I am. I am pretty, neat, I wear expensive clothes
- Performance I am successful (I perform well)
- Opinion I am right. My view on things is the only right one
- Group membership I am a Chicago Bull’s fan

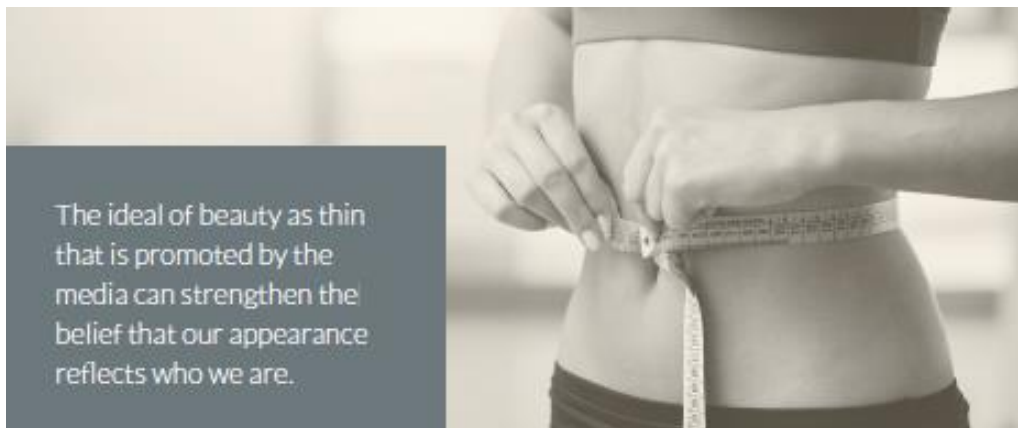
- Role I’m a victim (poor me, I’m sick, a loser, I’m abandoned), I’m social

and friendly, a caring person, a supporter (of a football team), I am Dutch (this is my country)

EGO

The word ego is often used regarding someone who is very full of him- or herself, we say that he or she has a “big ego”. Freud used the term “ego” to indicate a controlling part of the personality. In this context, the term ego refers to a self-image that is based on identification. It is therefore an invented identity. The ego is a created identity, a sense of “I” consisting of the belief that you are what you have, do, think and feel. The ego is a story that we have created that tells us and others who we are. In other words, the ego is the “me story”.

The content of the Ego is (very) personal. For one person, the content is determined by one’s status: “I am a psychologist” or ones role: “I am a victim”. For another person, the content of the Ego is filled with possessions, designer clothes, or a big house or an expensive car. Yet for another person the ego is mainly determined by a social or societal role: the wife, mother, business owner, etc.



There are many important factors that form our ego. It starts early, as soon as we, as children, are exposed to the norms, values, and rules of our parents. It could, for example, be that our parents think that it is important how others view us. Parents may teach us that “good” people work hard or that one should always help others. Also the school indicates, through teaching, what is important. Physical exercises and creativity are generally less important than language and mathematics. The media, especially in the Western world, is also a very strong factor that influences identity. Commercials, such as “Diesel, for successful living” or “your sneakers say more than 100 text messages” are just

two examples of how the media teaches us that external factors such as your appearance or your possessions actually say something about who you are or how important you are. Sometimes they even give clear guidelines about “how it should be”. Just think of the ideal of beauty as thin. Likewise, the opinions of experts can have a strong influence on a person’s created identity. Suppose you hear from your therapist that you are depressed, or even worse: you have a mood disorder. The moment that this label is seen as true and you therefore identify with it, you can become the disorder. Rather than being a person who faces difficulties, you now become a “patient”. Your struggles have now become an essential part of who you believe you are.

FEAR

The extent to which we identify with things has strong consequences for oneself and our environment. The main consequence is that this identification can create fear. The more I identify myself with things like my possessions or my role, the more value I attach to these things. The problem lies in the fact that the things, which we identify with, are inevitably temporary; things change. Therefore the realization that these things can fall away or can be lost arises. I could get fired or could fail my exam, I could lose my car, I will inevitably get older and less beautiful, there will come a point where I will not perform as well as I do at my peak. Then what? Fear arises because I believe I have become less worthy or that a part of me has died. What is left if my identity falls away? Who ‘I am’ is threatened. We become fearful that people around us will not appreciate us anymore, or in its deepest essence, that people will no longer recognize one’s existence. In the following sections, the consequences of this fear are discussed.

AFFIRMATION

We want to be sure that our identity is secure and will not disappear. After all, if these things (my money, status, appearance, performance) would disappear, something in us dies. We are less than we were. We can easily be dependent on others for our sense of self, through praise, recognition and admiration. This need for confirmation of our self-worth by others is called “contingent self-esteem” (Deci & Ryan, 1995).

CONTROL

The fear of losing status, appearance or possessions can make it so we want to control everyone and everything that has to do with our status or possessions. For example, if your appearance is an important part of your ego, the realization that you get older can cause you to try and control your appearance through cosmetic surgery. You may try to reassure yourself, by thinking everything is under control, “It’ll be okay, I am beautiful after cosmetic surgery, I have nothing to worry about when it comes to my aging looks”. The paradox is that the fear controls you, instead of vice versa. The fear actuates (controls) you in order to dominate the fear. You can become a slave of this fear.

IDENTITY STRENGTHENING

By the time my identity is defined by fear of things outside myself, it means: the more I have of this thing, the stronger my identity. More money means more “I”. More attractive means a better “I”. Even better performance means even a more successful “I”. When we think that our identity is threatened, this can generate the urge to guard the identity. In practice, this means that we do not settle for what we are or what we have, but that we are mainly concerned with what we should maintain and what we could add to ourselves: more diplomas, a nicer house, more salary, more beautiful clothes, a higher position, even better performance. This endeavour and these additions “guarantee” that we can never be less than we are now. The emphasis is on the result of what we want to achieve (namely an addition to our identity) instead of the process (doing something because you love to do it). Consider that if someone identifies with being a “victim”, “to want more” might mean maintaining or increasing this role by presenting themselves as even more pathetic or inferior, thereby strengthening their identity.



OUTPERFORMING OTHERS

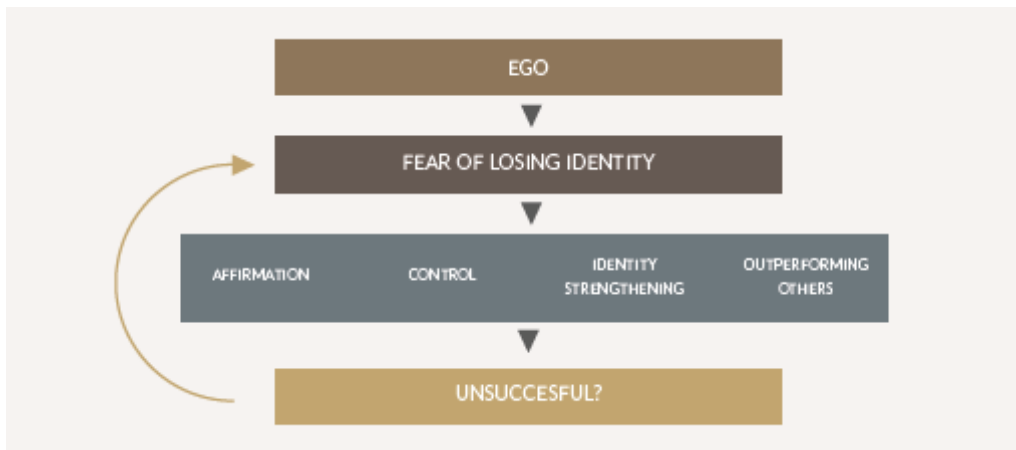
Being better than others can offer apparent resistance to fear about the value and permanence of my identifications (my money, status, appearance, performance). If I can be better than anyone else, this confirms my superiority. It strengthens my identity. It shows me that I am, relatively speaking, valuable. The other person is my benchmark for who I am. Sooner or later, however, we are confronted with people who are better than us in a particular area. They have more, are more successful, are prettier, etc. If this comparison is an area from which we do not derive identity from, there is nothing to worry about. Suppose, a good friend of yours breaks through with a song she wrote. If music is not part of your ego, her achievement will cause you to be happy and perhaps even proud of her (basking in reflected glory; Cialdini et al., 1976). Now, imagine that making music is part of your ego. In other words, music is part of your identity; you are a musician. Then the chances are much greater that you envy her performance and that your ego is threatened. When you identify with something, others will always be a potential threat to you. If you identify with the achievements in your work, if you really believe that it says something about the value of you as a human being, then you might consider colleagues as competitors. The success of another indirectly means that you are less important. It motivates the wanting to be better than others. Not primarily for the sake of your own development, but rather for the preservation and confirmation of your ego.

The same is true for identifications that place the self in a negative light. For example, if you identify with the view “I’m not good enough” or “I’m not special” others also play an important role in your self-evaluation. Maybe you will not strive for superiority, but you may see the better performance of others as a confirmation of your identity as an “unsuccessful” person. “See, they can do better than me.” Others constantly form a negative mirror for you because you focus on what they have or what they have achieved in contrast to what you have not yet achieved. In psychology this is called a bias that ensures maintaining a negative identity.

The pitfall of trying to deal with the fear that is caused by our ego’s desire to be maintained is that it has a negative influence on our well-being. People may not give us the affirmation we seek. We may get confronted with people who we believe are better than we are. Inevitably, things fall away with which we have identified. In all of these cases, fear can easily arise again and frustration, anger, jealousy or aggression may occur (Crocker, Karpinski, Quinn, & Chase, 2003).

In other words, the need of our own ego to “stay alive” can result in a life-long attempt to deal with fear and protect whatever we believe defines ourselves. This ongoing interplay between fear and control is illustrated in fig. 1.

Fig.1 Schematic representation of the interplay between fear and control initiated by the ego's need to be maintained



OTHER CHARACTERISTICS OF THE EGO

In addition to the previously discussed strategies of the ego to protect itself, there are other characteristics of behavior that is guided by the ego. We will discuss them in the following section.

SENSITIVITY TO THREATS

The ego is very sensitive to threats. A writer who strongly identifies with a book he wrote (the book is part of his identity; it is part of who he is), will have more difficulties dealing with criticism than someone who has no self-identification from the book he has written. Although the critic actually says: “I don’t like the book that this person has written, the ego experiences it as “I don’t like this person”. The criticism is seen as an attack on the self (the ego) instead of criticizing the work of that person.

DIFFICULTY WITH IMPERMANENCE

The ego has trouble with transience. This is because it comes from identification with things that are transient. Thoughts change, your appearance, car, social standing are all subject to transience. Sooner or later they will change or will no longer exist. By identifying with these things, you make something that is by definition transient part of yourself. For example, if I identify myself with my appearance, then it is difficult to endure a sense of self-worth as my appearance becomes less beautiful. I will be less beautiful. The greatest threat to the ego is of course death. Death is the ultimate threat to the created identity. Death will make every form disappear. Death is the confrontational, yet inevitable stamp on our transience. Research shows that as soon as people are confronted with their own mortality they often show strong

reactions such as stress, anxiety and a strong need to make meaning of their life (Terror Management Theory; Greenberg, Solomon, & Pyszczynski, 1997). This often creates a defensive reaction, such as the denial of vulnerability, suppressing thoughts, and the attempt to strengthen self-esteem (Greenberg, Pyszczynski, Solomon, Simon, & Breus, 1994). Interestingly enough, a series of seven experiments by Niemiec and colleagues (2010) showed that people

The observer that
is aware of the self-
stories of the ego is per
definition the non-ego.

who were more mindful, showed much less of the aforementioned defensive reactions when faced with their own death. People who are mindful therefore have less trouble with this transience.

SEPERATION

Since the ego provides the individual with an identity, a sense of who he is, it will also make every effort to maintain this identity. An identity can only exist by contrasts, by being better or more special than others. The Ego is therefore often busy comparing itself with others. The question that is relevant for the Ego is: “How does the other differ from me?”, instead of “What are the similarities between us?”. In this regard the Ego is focused on separation and on differences between one’s own ego and the ego of the others.

DIFFICULTY IN GIVING

When I identify with something like my ideas, money or possessions, it is difficult to share those with others. After all, if I give these things away, I will lose a piece of myself that is a piece of my identity. In doing so, I become less and you become more. If you give something from your ego, there must be a guarantee that the something will come back. It is a conditional giving.

BEYOND THE EGO

The concept ego raises many questions. What is the counterpart of the ego? What does it mean not to be identified with what we do or what we have? Can we get rid of the ego? As with the other topics we have discussed it also true that the moment you fight against the ego, it will appear through the back door again. If you say “I don’t have an ego anymore” then that is your new identity: the ego-less (enlightened) person. It is enough to be aware. We have talked about observing the self in the previous chapters. When you become aware of your fear, you do not judge it but just look at it, as an observer of the feeling. You no longer are your feeling, you are simply the observer of it. In other words, you no longer identify with the feeling. The one who perceives the feeling is by definition the non-ego. So you could say that the counterpart of the ego is consciousness.

This awareness can help us see that what extends our ego affects our actions and thinking. What do we hope to achieve with the goals we set? Are those ego-goals-goals that we want to achieve because we expect them to make us happier or more successful? Or do we set goals, because we want to walk the path to the goal? What things do we do out of fear? Why do we judge that person? Why do we react in extreme ways if someone makes a comment about something that we have done? Why do we find it difficult to reward the other persons success? Why is it so important to me to earn a lot of money, to be beautiful? Why do I want to be right?

MINDFULNESS AND THE EGO

Mindfulness leads to the understanding that you are more than just a form. More than your body, your thoughts, and emotions. You are not what you identify with. Imagine that everything you identify with falls apart (your job, your friends, your body), is there still something or someone left? The answer is yes. You are the consciousness that observes these identifications, that sees them change or disappear. Through the practice of mindfulness the observer in you gets stronger. This observer is not identified with experiences or concepts. The practice of mindfulness can be seen as a way to see through the ego. By being more aware of the ego and its functioning, the influence of the ego is limited. You create options. You alter the *function* of the ego through mindfulness. But what does “altering the function of the ego” exactly mean?



From the previous sections, you may come to the conclusion that the ego is “bad”. Nothing is further from the truth. First, the ego makes it possible to get to know your non-ego, your true self. In other words, you need an ego in order to see through and also to get closer to yourself. Moreover, if you see the ego as something “bad” an immediate struggle arises in yourself as well as the desire to change it or to get rid of it. The ego (sometimes also called rational mind) is a tool that helps us function in the outside world. Without an ego, a

mind that helps see one's self as a standalone entity, we could not function in this world. The ego ensures that we can live in the world of materials. The ego helps us to create, to structure and to manifest in this world. The ego is the connection between the true self (pure consciousness or awareness) and the outside world. If you had no ego, it would be impossible to claim your place in this world. The ego ensures that we can give space to ourselves, to be and to say "Here I am and this is how I do it".

Imagine that we were only mindful. We would only be in the infinite now. Time would not exist, good and bad would not exist anymore, goals would no longer exist; we just "are". We would only "do" very little (see fig. 2). Through mindfulness we can turn attention inward and consider ourselves as a starting point. From this point, we can step into the outside world. By first making contact with what we feel, think and experience, we can subsequently take action in the world outside of us. In this manner, we can express those things which correspond with our own values. For example, if we know what we find important in our lives, we can act in accordance with this self-understanding in the outside world. We know our strengths and also our weaknesses; we can express our true self to the outside world and make choices in which we can benefit. This external world is now a place to express ourselves (through for example choices, creation or interaction with other people). In this case, the ego is rather a tool that helps us to be autonomous and authentic (see fig. 3). Research shows that people who are more mindful: a) show more autonomy b) are less dependent on the outside world for their self-confidence c) are more able to name both their strengths as well as their shortcomings.

Fig.2 Schematic representation of the function of the self and the outside world

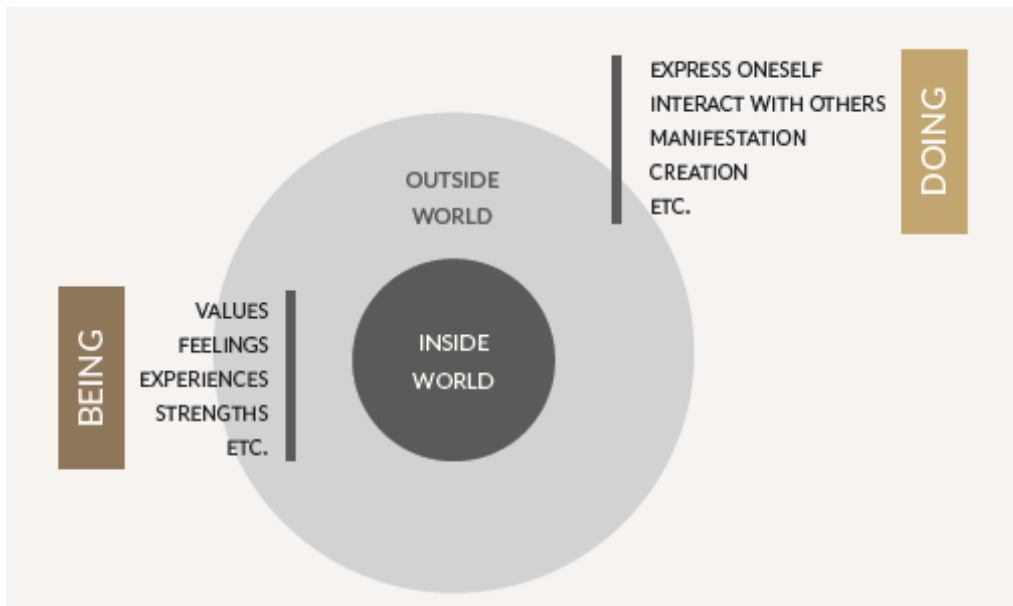
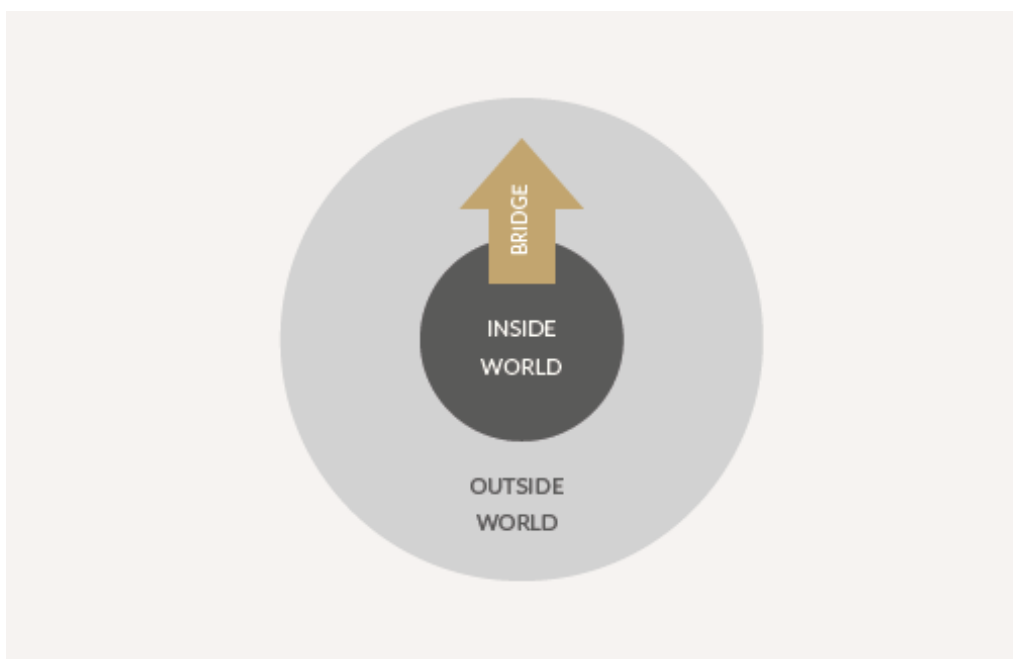


Fig.3 By staying in touch with the inside world, the ego functions as a bridge between the inside world and the outside world

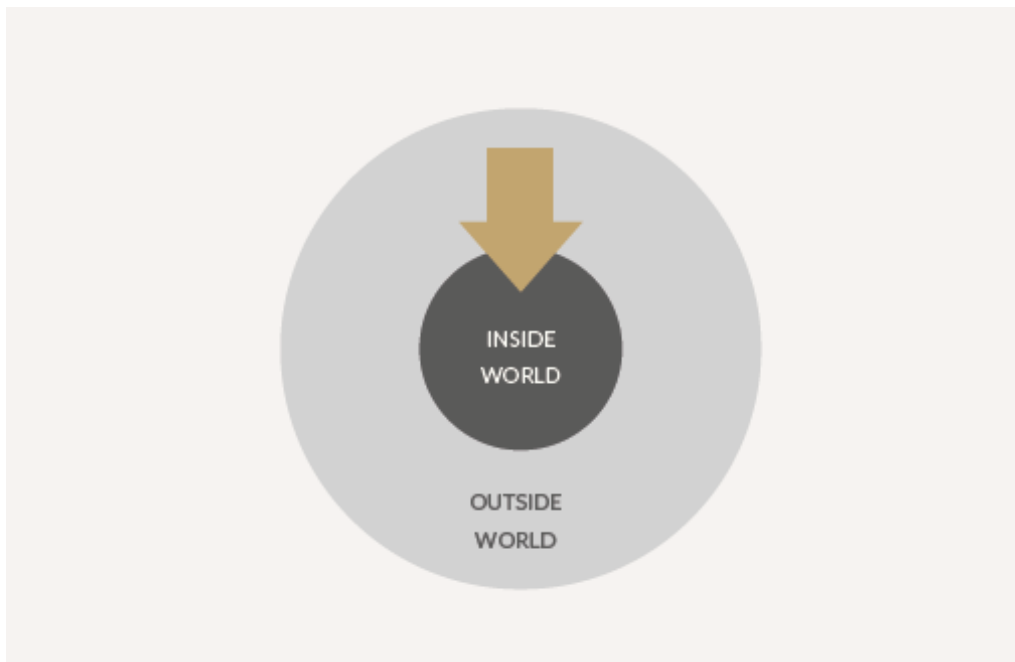


The ego, as discussed at the beginning of this chapter, is usually the result of a lack of contact with the inside world (see fig. 4). Because one is not listening to what the body is saying and one is not in contact with one's own emotion (suppressing them), the outside world becomes the main guide for choices. We become located in the outside world without being in contact with our own experience and consciousness. The conditioned thinking and the outside world are now the only standards. They dictate what is "good" and what is "bad", what is "success" and what is "failure", what "good" professions are, what "losers" are, what is "right", and what is "inappropriate". In short, the outside

world becomes our guide. What we believe is important now comes from the outside. In this case the ego is no longer a tool that serves the authentic self, but it has become a stand-alone identity. It tells you who you are based on the rules of the outside world.

The biggest problem of being lost in the outside world for many people is that this world offers endless possibilities. Having to choose among endless options can create the fear of making the wrong choice. We then may start to rely on the advice of other people in the hope that they help us finding the right answer. However, people may give different and conflicting kinds of advice and we may become even more lost than before. Moreover, we soon realize that it is impossible to please everybody. Whatever we choose or do, there will always be people who agree and people who disagree. Only if we make contact with our inner world (the world of consciousness within ourselves), we can find out what we consider to be truly important in life. Then we can find out which of the many possibilities suits us and makes us happy. Only if we know, which activities give us energy and joy, how we want to be remembered after our death and with which people we want to feel a deep connection, we can make choices that lead to happiness. Taking our inner world as the starting point of our choices thus drastically reduces the number of perceived options of the world outside ourselves.

Fig.4 By losing touch with our inside world, the ego functions as an independent entity that strongly influences our inside world and guides our choices.



PRACTICE: OBSERVING THE EGO

Every human being has an ego. There is nothing wrong with it: it can be used as a useful tool, as long as you are aware of the ego and its functioning. However, identification is a process that (unconsciously) takes place for most people.

Write down beliefs you have about yourself. For example: “I am a caring person”, “I am well taken care of”, “I am intelligent”, “I cannot deal with emotions”, etc. This exercise is not about determining to what extent these beliefs are true, it’s about considering these beliefs. Our identity consists of what we think about ourselves. The ego is a product of our mind, of our thoughts. It is our identification with the story about ourselves. Because we are so attached to the thoughts and feelings about ourselves, and we believe that they are true, they largely determine our lives.

You can also learn to see these thoughts about yourself as what they are: thoughts. They are not truths. No matter how true the thoughts you have about yourself may seem, they remain thoughts. They are not truths.

This week, you might in your mind, come across one or more of the beliefs you have written down. Whenever you notice that you think, “I am...” this week, either during meditation or elsewhere, look to see if you can view it as a thought. You can say to yourself “it is just a thought”. You can also always pay special attention to the fact that you notice the thought. For example: “I notice that I am judging myself” or “I notice that I had a thought about who I am”. You do not need to analyze or challenge the thought. Awareness is sufficient. You are not your mind; you are the one who perceives the thoughts.

Feeling threatened can also be a sign of identification and ego. If you come across situations this week in which you feel attacked or have the idea that you have to protect something just note the thought. Perhaps ask yourself “What do I need to protect?” and then go back to what you are feeling. Write these experiences down during the week to gain more insight into your ego and identification patterns.

AT HOME

- Do the exercise “Three-minute Breathing Space” about three times a day
- Do the exercise “Observing the Ego”
- Do the seated meditation as much as you can this week.

LOGBOOK

MONDAY

Exercise	Times performed	Observations or perceptions during the exercise
Seated meditation		
Three-minute Breathing Space		
Observing the Ego		

TUESDAY

Exercise	Times performed	Observations or perceptions during the exercise
Seated meditation		
Three-minute Breathing Space		
Observing the Ego		

WEDNESDAY

Exercise	Times performed	Observations or perceptions during the exercise
Seated meditation		
Three-minute Breathing Space		
Observing the Ego		

THURSDAY

Exercise	Times performed	Observations or perceptions during the exercise
Seated meditation		
Three-minute Breathing Space		
Observing the Ego		

FRIDAY

Exercise	Times performed	Observations or perceptions during the exercise
Seated meditation		
Three-minute Breathing Space		
Observing the Ego		

SATURDAY

Exercise	Times performed	Observations or perceptions during the exercise
Seated meditation		
Three-minute Breathing Space		
Observing the Ego		

SUNDAY

Exercise	Times performed	Observations or perceptions during the exercise
Seated meditation		
Three-minute Breathing Space		
Observing the Ego		

NOTES
