

Slang, Freud and Buddhist Psychology: Clarifying the Term “Ego” in Popular, Psychodynamic and Spiritual Contexts

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The Latin term ego was first used in a translation of Freud’s work to refer to his idea of the “I” or the reality principle within the dynamic forces of the psyche. He suggests the functions of the “I” include reasoning, a sense of self-capacity and the mediator between the polarized demands of instinctual drives and societal expectations. While he considered the “I” a mechanism of the self, he did not use the term ego. Nevertheless the word ego entered the mainstream in professional conversations of the analytic understanding of the human being as it began with Freud’s thought.

As psychology became popularized the word ego entered the common vernacular to describe attitudes and behaviors considered selfish or inflated. The slang use of ego is generally a derogatory term for behaviors considered out of the range of social acceptance. Slang borrows from the inflated side of the psychodynamic description of the unhealthy manifestations of ego yet lacks a deeper understanding of its causes.

In the 1970’s Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, a Tibetan lama, began utilizing the term ego to describe a neurotic process based on the ignorance of our actual situation (Trungpa, 1978) resulting in a solidified sense of self that is separate and self-referential and as such is the cause of suffering. He saw the projections of the ego as an incorrect understanding of the interdependent nature of reality and the primary obstruction to clear seeing and compassion. He borrowed aspects of the term from both psychology and modern vernacular usage.

Buddhists around the world have embraced this usage of the term ego and use it regularly to describe the common illusion of a static separate self that emphasizes it’s self-importance in relation to the world. This Buddhist definition can now be understood as a unique understanding of the word ego as well. The field of transpersonal psychology has borrowed from the Buddhist usage of the term ego in the psychological and spiritual mapping of human development.

The confusion that has arisen from the different usages of the term ego is significant to those in the field of psychology as well as Buddhist practitioners who have an incomplete understanding of the word in its several contexts. The general public would also benefit from a further understanding of the factors relating to the formation of an aggrandized sense of self to which the slang usage of ego refers.

For a rudimentary understanding of the psychodynamic view of ego we must understand how it is one aspect of a trio of the major forces Freud delineated within the human psyche. Representing a self-part mostly but not entirely within conscious access, the ego's job is to meet primary human needs by mediating between the forces of the id, or instinctual drives, and the superego, or the introjected societal injunctions coming from outside the person.

The ego is characterized by numerous functions including consciousness of self and the environment, knowledge of self-capacities and limitations, management of emotions, reasoning and logical thinking, continuity of self through space and time, social skills and character formation.

As the term ego came into popular usage a common word associated with its slang usage is narcissism, also borrowed from the psychological literature. A word made common in the literature by Freud, narcissism describes a spectrum of self-regard from healthy esteem to an overly aggrandized and entitled sense of self. The slang usage connotes only the unhealthy end of the spectrum of narcissism perceived as self-absorption and a "me" orientation that disregards or uses others. In clinical psychology the Narcissistic Personality Disorder (American Psychiatric Association, 1994) also refers to problems at the negative end of the spectrum of Freud's original psychological definition.

Problems to healthy ego development include a distorted sense of one's capacities that are either inflated or deflated. Not understood in the popular discourse is the deflated version of narcissism, a self-orientation characterized by an exaggerated perception of one's smallness, victimization and incapacity to defend against the world. In this case individuals would consider themselves the "worst" rather than the "best" and use the qualifier as an attempt to garner negative or care-taking attention.

The Buddhist concept of ego acknowledges the problems of distortion at both ends of the spectrum of unhealthy development yet sees these misperceptions inherent in the mistaken view of a permanent and separate self. While acknowledging the importance of confidence in one's Buddha Nature, or capacity for compassion and wisdom, the Buddhist view is particularly wary of any conceptualization of a definitive self. Freedom from suffering, or health in the Buddhist sense, is derived from the deconstruction of the illusions of the ego as an autonomous and singular self in the world.

This paper explores and compares the usage of the term ego in these three contexts across eight factors including identity, intra-psychic awareness, control, reality, relationship, empathy, needs and fear. Healthy and unhealthy aspects of ego in the psychological and developmental sense are explored in relation to the Buddhist view of non-self and the problems associated to ego. Contrast to the slang usage of the term ego is provided to clarify any vernacular misunderstandings. Refer to the chart at the end of the article for an overview of ego in context of its use in slang, psychodynamic psychology and Buddhism.

Identity

“He’s so egotistical.” “She’s an egomaniac.” “He’s such a narcissist.” “She’s so inflated.” Psychological language has saturated the airwaves of our everyday conversation. We label and “diagnose” others and ourselves with the slang version of these terms. The diagnosis comes across as a judgment and hardens into an identity. It is how we identify someone else or a part of ourselves we don’t like. We believe the other thinks of him or herself as superlative and according to this slang system so does he or she. The attitude is self-aggrandizing and inflates self-regarded traits as positive while downplaying or denying negative traits.

The Buddhist use of the term ego describes an identity that is false yet deeply engrained and believed habitual tendencies. While the qualities of inflation are not excluded in its definition, Buddhism describes an overarching error in ego’s understanding of reality. The error is an ignorance of our impermanence and interdependence. Inflation or deflation is a further spin on the misunderstanding of ego as an existent entity.

The belief in an existent self lends itself to the problems of self-importance and self-derision. If we believe in an objectified existence than we are at once vulnerable to an objectified evaluation of that existence. The fluid unbounded quality of interdependence is lost and our perceptual distortions are magnified when we falsely separate self and other. A separate identity creates comparison and ranking as well as estrangement and a utilitarian view of personhood.

The continuity of self critical to a psychologically healthy ego structure is understood from the Buddhist view as a relative function helpful in navigating a relative world. In the absolute sense the self is not permanent or real. In a relative sense self is a mistaken view that increases suffering by fixing the individual in a static state. The “I” of yesterday and tomorrow is a fiction. The “I” of today is a fleeting idea falsely extracted from a continuum of awareness.

The seeming development of character or fixed traits, considered healthy in ego development is considered an obstruction to liberation in Buddhism. If we conceive of our character as strong, an experience of weakness can be debilitating. If we conceive of ourselves as humble, we remain unaware of an arrogant pride behind the self-conception. Healthy self-regard in either system is based in a person’s actuality. A relative understanding of one’s strengths and limitations in the Buddhist view is held lightly and subject to continual investigation that sees through any permanent view.

Intra-psychic Awareness

Psychologically healthy adults are able to utilize the ego function to moderate between physiological drives and introjected societal injunctions. Healthy individuals are aware of thoughts and can modulate the inner voices representing different aspects of

themselves. Clinical interventions in psychotherapy enhance personal awareness of thoughts and emotions and often prescribe ways to modify the inner dialogue to increase well-being. Somatic oriented therapies bring awareness to body sensations to help individuals map the source of emotions and the effects of thought on bodily experience.

The ego of the psychologically unhealthy individual is likely to have poor or rigid impulse or superego control. Operating out of unconscious drives this person cannot find satisfaction in life without extreme manipulation. A person with this wound to their ego development may reactively rage with no clue regarding the source of their behavior. Another person with overly rigid boundaries might compulsively control all expression of emotion with no understanding of their flattened affect. Labeled “clueless” in the popular vernacular, blame for lack of control or overcontrol is often projected onto others.

Buddhists have no quarrel with the utility of a function increasing the capacities of the intra-psychic sphere. It is suspicious of relying on a function that defines itself as “I” and generally understands the “I” to have a vested interest in maintaining itself. The “I” conspires to maintain the delusions of its unexamined beliefs and projects these onto the world.

The practice of mindfulness is designed to increase awareness of mental activity and bodily actions without an “I”. Calm-abiding meditation creates a spacious platform within the psyche to better observe the mechanisms of the mind from a state of equanimity. Impartial seeing made available in a state of calm is void of the “I” and brings rest to frantic self-deceptive and defensive activities of the psyche.

The ego self-part of the psychological literature overlaps but is not necessarily similar to the Buddhist definition of ego as an “I” identified self-part. Psychological ego may operate out of a vested interest or not. When it operates as an “I” to maintain itself it is the ego that Buddhists seek to dissolve through impartial examination.

Control

The slang terms referring to the “bully”, the “princess”, and the “control freak” are obvious examples of individuals exhibiting controlling behavior out of a need to protect their self-interest. These stereotypes are driven by an inflated sense of their capacity to manipulate events or others in their favor. They would be considered to have a “big ego” or be “ego driven” in the popular vernacular and limited in their range of development in the eyes of psychology.

The psychological perspective of the problems of control includes behaviors that are not so obvious. The response to life with a weak ego structure is made narrow by attempts to limit the impact of anything from outside the self. The controlling behavior appears less obvious and may include isolation, rigidity, conformity or codependence.

A dichotomized self also limits inner choice where the ego function is unable to effectively mediate between the exaggerated forces of the superego and id. Dictates or drives may dominate, oscillate in their domination or incapacitate the individual in a stalemate where he or she may feel stuck or tied up in knots.

A healthy ego in the psychological sense has the capacity to regulate a range of needs that are both social and driven by basic survival and physiological functions. Will power or control as a function of ego includes the capacity to forgo immediate pleasure for long-term goals. Will is the energy the ego needs to be able to effect change in the world. A healthy sense of will operates internally and self-regulation is optimized by a realistic sense of one's strengths and limitations.

The problem of control in Buddhist thinking stems from the false security created by an ego or "I" that believes it is in power. Control is an attempt to abate the basic underlying fears of safety, aloneness and unworthiness (Gyaltzen, 2009). Buddhist practice seeks to enhance capacity for intention, focus, concentration, reasoning and choice yet the training of the mind cultivates an approach to life based on letting go of control. On an outer level control implies clinging to a particular outcome and is an intrusive attempt to manipulate results. On the inner level control is marked by confusion and division within the heart. Compassionate mind training dissolves warring self-parts seeking command through the violence of self-control.

Confidence in the path to liberation is not attached to the look and feel of freedom. Often seekers are quite surprised by the ordinariness of living openly and without habituated patterns of control.

Relationship

Understanding the needs of self and other the psychologically healthy person cultivates a sense of give and take in relationship. Social adaptation is an essential skill for meeting basic human needs. The infant needs consistent human warmth and contact to survive. Mirroring, the reflection back to the child by a caregiver of the child's emotional state, provides affirmation of the child's experience.

Children naturally reciprocate mirroring early in their development and in nurturing relationships experience a deepening of connection and mutual exchange with others. Later development includes learning to respect the boundaries and differing needs of self and other.

When there are traumatic interruptions or aberrations in bonding the self-other boundary is confused and relationship skills are blunted. A child cannot properly "hatch" (Mahler, 1973) and experiences insecurity in both autonomous and intimate functions. Closeness and aloneness are both experienced as threatening to the weak ego structure. Carrying over into adulthood others are experienced as an extension of the self, used to shore up a sense of inadequacy or seen as unavailable or rejecting.

The nomenclature of slang labels a category of behaviors indicative of this narcissistic wound as selfish or self-centered. The individual who has not been adequately mirrored (Miller, 1981) continues to seek the missing element of their childhood by constantly seeking attention and goods from others. Development is arrested at a stage where it was necessary that others served their needs before the child learned to reciprocate. Other manifestations of this wound to the ego are not described in the popularized use of the term narcissism. They include but are not limited to the mental health problems of social isolation, low self-esteem, addiction and depression.

The Buddhist concept of interdependence informs our understanding of relationship and the natural reciprocity inherent in all of life. While a psychodynamic perspective understands the autonomous development of the individual as a necessity, Buddhism points to the danger of the extremes of self-sufficiency creating a false sense of “I.” This “I” or ego manipulates and misperceives self and other.

Suffering in relationships stem from the extremes of independence and dependence. One is marked by the painful experience of isolation and the other is an immature fusion where our demands on others do not reflect our chronological age. Learning to walk the interdependent path begins with the practice of attending to the present moment, seeing through the impermanence of past wounds and trusting the guidance of our teachers to mirror our yearning for compassion and liberation from suffering.

The Bodhisattva Vow, to liberate others before oneself counters the tendency of the individual to attend to oneself and not the other. From the Buddhist point of view we are all narcissistically wounded in clinging to the “I” and its delusional views and habits. This parallels the psychodynamic view of neurosis as a matter of degree (deSilva, 2010). Waking up requires the development of clear seeing and the reversal of painful self-centric patterns in relationship.

Empathy

Empathy is a powerful relationship skill that develops out of the mirroring process. When a parent makes a sad face to mirror her child’s unhappiness not only does the child receive understanding, the parent feels the sadness in his or her own face and has a direct somatic experience approximating the child’s state. The capacity for empathy in the adult is enhanced and conveyed at a level the child can understand. The parent feels with the child and not just for the child. Putting oneself in another’s shoes helps to develop emotional intelligence.

The psychologically wounded individual may be unable to enter the experience of another or may have difficulty differentiating himself or herself from the other person if they do. The experience of loneliness or emotional entanglement can be heightened to intolerable levels.

Lack of empathy commonly manifests in incorrect assumptions about others and the projection of disowned qualities onto the unknown other. Without a feeling sense of the other, the ensuing experience of distance often leads to overly negative assumptions or projections. The emotionally immature parent may believe his or her colicky infant is rejecting the parent. The parent in turn rejects the child for “crying too much.” If projection is active in the parent who has denied his or her own tears due to trauma or introjected beliefs he or she may label the child “bad” for crying. The parents dissociated sadness or grief is projected onto the child and becomes the unconscious reason for pushing the child away.

The emotionally confluent individual who is fused with others suffers confusion between the emotions of self and other (Perls, 1973). The parent with this particular form of weak ego structure may assume the child’s state is a mirror of his or her own emotion. If the child is angry, the parent is angry. If the child is impatient, the parent is impatient. Likewise the child may be expected to have the same feelings of the parent and when he or she does not, the child is rejected. Parents may also assume the child is just like them and fail to see the child’s uniqueness.

Compassion in Buddhism is related to empathy as it is based in entering the experience of the other. The Latin root of the word refers to having deep feelings (passion) with (com) another. Compassion implies a further response of an action to bring relief to the passion (suffering) of the other. In this case passion is understood as the impossible desire to escape “what is.”

A compassionate response can pierce the ego-encasement that an individual has built to protect him or herself from pain. Compassion acknowledges and accepts loss and other feelings imagined as too big to bear. Compassion understands the ultimate boundarylessness of experience and the natural exchange continuously occurring between all beings.

In the Buddhist view any wall created to protect the self from others is the creation of ego or a false sense of self. At the same time Buddhism does not deny the uniqueness or the different experiences of each human being. The task to hold both relative and absolute understanding of self and no-self is embraced on the path of liberation.

Needs

Needs are understood as normative in the psychologically healthy individual. Marshall Rosenberg lists basic categories of needs including physiologic, interdependence, choice integrity, contribution, spirituality and celebration (Rosenberg, 2008). The psychologically healthy person can satisfactorily meet needs and with increasing maturation tolerates frustration and delayed gratification.

Disruptions to healthy ego development create exaggerated responses to needs. The narcissistic personality attempts to gratify needs in ways that distorts self-perception and will eventually hurt relationships. The gratified narcissist is successful in procuring an excess of emotional or physical “goods”. The ungratified narcissist is unsuccessful in meeting needs and remains focused on a dissatisfied state often at the cost of learning the skills to procure life’s necessities. Both the gratified and ungratified person is considered fixated in an unhealthy manner on the objects of their desire. Extreme states of fixation have obsessive or compulsive qualities.

Slang terms referring to the individual who appears to be overly gratified include “greedy”, “stingy”, “self-satisfied”, “gluttonous” or “entitled”. These individuals are considered to be oriented to their own needs at the expense of others. The ungratified person may be considered a “suck”, “desperate” or a “loser”.

Buddhists can understand the universality of needs by reflecting on those that are provided by the three jewels of the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. Within Sangha we find our needs met for acceptance, contribution, support, warmth and honesty. The Dharma meets our need for truth and clarity. The jewel of the Buddha fulfills our need for guidance and inspiration (Bowman, 2009).

The Buddhist view also focuses on the problem of desire driving a constant craving for external objects and experience. The focus on personal needs reifies the “I” and reflects an ego driven state of continual discontent. The cessation of desire is primary to the path of liberation from suffering. Any clinging to self or other fosters dissatisfaction with life and an inability to accept the impermanent nature of all things. The acceptance of interdependence appreciates the play of exchange without clinging to needs, strategies to meet needs or an expected outcome.

Fear

The healthy person learns to manage fear and difficult emotions in daily life situations. To varying degrees of success psychotherapy addresses individuals who have been exposed to traumatic events that cause dysregulation in the fear response. While the healthy person can tolerate ambiguity, repeated or high levels of traumatic experience can impair ego functioning that moderates external stimuli and internal thoughts and imagery. Individuals who suffer from Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome (American Psychiatric Association, 1994) are easily triggered by situations that may appear innocuous yet are associated to earlier harmful or violent events.

The child who is subject to isolation, enmeshed boundaries and less traumatic levels of abuse also experiences higher levels of anxiety than normal when performing developmental tasks requiring increasing social or autonomous skills. An overly defended ego stance can result in the formation of an adult persona that presents as fearless and brash. This personality will likely respond with aggression when threatened.

The person with an ego that is overly porous may present as engulfed in fear at the slightest threat. This person responds with a range of reactive behaviors including hostility, submission or retreat from life. The retreating individual may hide in compulsive activities or significantly limit contact with others or challenging events. Some individuals retreat into a superior attitude that in effect limits contact with others.

Slang addresses a narrow range of dysfunction related to fear. The fearless “as if” personality is labeled “cocky”, “brazen” and “swaggering.” The individual is referred to as “puffed up”, a Donald Trump type. At the other end of the spectrum the person presenting as intellectually or culturally superior is considered “aloof”, “condescending”, a “know-it-all” or “conceited.” Slang fails to acknowledge the wound behind these behaviors.

Buddhism sees the construction of an “I” as the basis of a fear driven response to the impermanent and unpredictable nature of life. The “I” or ego gives the illusion of stability and becomes something to protect and defend. While not always within the diagnostic range of clinical psychology this “I” limits the individual’s capacity to respond to the fullness of life or experience the freedom that is possible. Liberation from suffering is liberation from fear.

Existential anxiety is considered normative in the psychological view yet the path of healing described in Buddhism seeks to undercut the root of all anxiety. Ponlop describes existential fear as the subliminal panic that is all-pervasive in every living heart (Ponlop, 2007). The universal mistake of clinging to an “I” is addressed in learning to attend with relaxation to moment-to-moment experience and the investigation of the truth of that experience. Calm-abiding developed in meditation is the basis for the discovery of an unbounded reality free of the shackles of ego-clinging and the fear states ego induces.

Freedom from fear is also the freedom to work with fear as it arises and passes in awareness. True liberation embraces the paradox of our relative and absolute knowing of any experience. We understand fears inherent nonexistence when we are able to extinguish our attachment to its appearance. As we follow its arising and falling we learn to see through our mistaken beliefs in its solidity. We do not have power over fear nor does it have power over us. Paradoxically complete acceptance of fear creates the spaciousness in our lives that offers complete peace as well.

Reality

Reasoning and conceptual thinking are considered cornerstones of the psychologically healthy ego structure. In order to function in society a person must understand and work with the consensual reality of their culture including an orientation to time and space.

Cognitive therapies emphasize working with thought processes to assist individuals in managing emotions and reducing distorted thinking that contributes to depression and other psychological problems. The healthy individual has developed an internalized conceptual structure that is able to prioritize and make value decisions grounded in reality.

A workable orientation to consensual reality includes the understanding and acceptance of basic social codes that make civil discourse and interpersonal relationships possible. The health of a society is affected by the degree of human considerations in those social standards and the role they play in the development of the superego in its individual members. Overly rigid family and societal standards make for a harsh inner critic with low tolerance for differentiation from a narrow range of acceptable behavior. A rebellious attitude is the converse side to the critical inner voice and may or may not be acted out. Confused or lax standards contribute to an ego structure that is unable to manage the conflicting demands of instinctual drives and internalized societal messages.

Slang refers to the individual with a grandiose perception of their place in the world as “arrogant” or “God’s gift to the world.” “She thinks she is the center of the universe” or “he acts like the world rotates around him” would be phrases used to refer to someone who misperceives their importance in relation to others and bends consensual reality in their favor.

The individual who acts as if they can defy physics or the basic rules of traffic is called “deluded” and “grandiose”. The “egomaniac” is considered out of control and others might say, “He believes he is immortal” or “she thinks she can defy death.” All of these slang terms refer to a lack of a reality orientation combined with an inflated ego. The individual with an extremely weak ego structure and severe delusions may be called “psycho” or “crazy.” Even the person who has difficulty organizing life’s details or thinking logically through problems is considered a “mess” or “haywire.”

Buddhists understand the underlying tenants of consensual reality as deluded. Society fosters the mistaken belief in an existent self and other. This belief induces a sense of self-importance or that “the world is my oyster.” Reality in the Buddhist view is empty of anything considered singular, independent or permanent, concepts that contribute to the misperception of one’s immortality or fear and denial of death.

The non-dualist view of reality cuts through the delusion of a separate self reified by the social constructs inherent in language. Conceptual thinking obscures an accurate perception of reality by dividing it into pieces that can then be arranged to fit an agreed upon consensual reality or create an even more deluded one. While logic is not abandoned in Buddhist thinking and actually encouraged in the practice of investigating reality, it is used to point to an understanding that is free or empty of concepts. This nondual view is considered the basis of liberation from the suffering created by ego’s attachment to a false reality centered in “I.”

Conclusion

Psychology's limited understanding of human development as culminating in healthy ego functioning reinforces the mistaken belief in the "I" as substantial and driven by psychosocial needs and desires. The view of psychology colludes with culture in reifying the permanence of what is impermanent, the ever-shifting self-image that solidifies when we generalize our experience into categories such as "good" and "bad" or "you" and "me". While psychology has much to offer individuals who suffer from serious problems related to interruptions in the developmental cycle, it does not address the suffering that ego-identity and ego-clinging creates for all of humankind.

It is helpful to address wounds to the healthy development of the psychologically defined ego before or while engaging in meditation practices to see through the illusions of the "I" in the Buddhist sense. The adage that "You have to be somebody before you can be nobody" (Engler, 1986) is relevant here. The relative sense of an identity and constancy in relationship are necessary starting points for the disciplines of concentration and investigation that are utilized to uncover the insubstantiality of self and the objects of the world.

The person with an ego that is not adequately differentiated from the other does not have the ability to witness its internalized other. Self-reflection is a danger zone for individuals with a stunted capacity to manage harsh introjected superego voices or impulses of the primitive drives of the id. The capacity to maintain a neutral awareness and not be caught or flooded by the contents of awareness is marginalized by varying degrees. In this respect the development of the inner witness is understood as an ego function that is a precondition to the collapse of the self-other divide representing a deeper state of knowing in Buddhism.

When the understanding of self in the world is too strong or not strong enough these distorted perceptions increase clinging to the objects of the world to either enhance inflation or shore up a deflated sense of self. This attachment decreases one's capacity to delay gratification and increases misperceptions that unchecked desire drives. When the ego function of self-constancy is low insecurity makes meditation difficult to impossible to practice. When the correlating ego function of other-constancy is wounded it is difficult to hold any object in awareness without unmanageable levels of fear interrupting the process.

The problem of ego bashing in popular discourse becomes a super-ego function void of compassion or deeper understanding of the wound beneath the self-centric pattern. While the use of derogatory labels may function as norm setting for a culture, they provide no assistance to the individual to correct the dysfunction. Labels given to others or to oneself typically create further division in relationships or increase self-hatred.

In Buddhist circles ego bashing may have a similar yet subtler superego function. On one level when we disregard the developmental necessity of certain psychodynamic

ego functions we fail to acknowledge their importance on the path to liberation. This failure can impede progress when serious wounds to the development of a sense of self make it difficult to release that self. The insecure self, whether puffed up or dejected, adheres to anything in fear of annihilation. Without addressing the relative value of the self-functions, void of extraneous and distorted ideas about that self, one cannot progress along the path.

When Buddhists say ego is *the problem* it is important to notice that there may be a subtle quality of the superego talking down to the ego. When we name our ego as getting in the way of freedom we may be creating a label of distain that becomes solidified in our minds. My “I” becomes bad, not something to look at with impartiality. Any prior injury to a realistic view of our capacities and limitations is a precondition for further ego bashing even when it is dressed up in Buddhist terminology.

Modern psychology has much to gain from Buddhism in the investigation of the self, its utility and problems. Trungpa states that:

When we talk about egolessness, that does not mean simply the absence of ego itself. It means the absence of the projections of the ego. Egolessness comes more or less as a by-product of seeing the transitory, transparent nature of the world outside. Once we have dealt with the projections of ego and seen their transitory and transparent nature, then the ego has no reference point, nothing to relate to. So the notions of inside and outside are interdependent—ego began and its projections began. Ego managed to maintain its identity by means of its projections. When we are able to see projections as nonsubstantial, ego becomes transparent correspondingly (Trungpa, 1978).

Looking through the transparency of ego there is nothing to impede clear seeing and the compassion derived from this enlightened vision. The work of withdrawing our habitual tendencies and projections is the path to the cessation of suffering. While clinical psychology addresses many debilitating and erroneous patterns of projection, the methods of Buddhism address the root of projection itself.

Viewing ego in the context of no referential point we begin to comprehend its relative significance to the development of an ultimate understanding of reality. Eighth century Zen poet Sandokai says, “Ordinary life fits the Absolute as a box and its lid” (Suzuki, 2001). Our ordinary understanding of “I” and “other” is the ground of our freedom and our ignorance. Psychology helps us cut through the gross layers of our delusions; Buddhism offers us a clear path to extinguish suffering and experience the liberation that is our birthright.

THE TERM EGO IN CONTEXT	SLANG: COMMON USAGE	PSYCHO-DYNAMIC: UN-HEALTHY	PSYCHO-DYNAMIC: HEALTHY	BUDDHIST VIEW: PROBLEMS OF EGO	BUDDHIST VIEW: EGOLESSNESS
IDENTITY	Egomaniac, Egotistical, Narcissist inflated, aggrandizing, "Gods gift to the world"	Inflated or deflated, extreme (ex: hyper-masculine or hyper-feminine)	Continuity of self, formation of character structure, Healthy self-regard	A fixed & solid sense of self is illusion, character formation is neurotic, Mistaking the continuum for a self	No self, confidence in basic goodness, boundaryless, impermanence, continuity of experience
INTRA-PSYCHIC AWARENESS	"Clueless" about inner life, impoverished inner dialogue	Poor or rigid impulse and superego control, operates out of unconscious drives	Ego moderates Id (drives) and Superego (introjected societal injunctions), self-aware	Self-perception is deceptive, Ego conspires to maintain delusional view of itself	Mindfulness and meditation cultivates awareness and inner spaciousness
CONTROL	"Bully", "Princess", "Control freak", Inflated sense of capacity, exhibitionist	Controlling or out-of-control, narrow response to life, Denies vulnerability	Willpower to effect change, can regulate self, Realistic sense of capacity & limitations	Control is ego clinging, habituated response, false security in sense of self	Non-attachment, openness, freedom, confidence in path to liberation
KNOWLEDGE	"Know-it-all", "big-headed" Arrogant, Conceited, "The world is my oyster", egocentric	Knowledge used for self protection, unaware of ignorance, projects self onto world	Maximizes learning, reasoning, conceptual thinking Works with consensual reality, grounded in the world	Ignorance, logic based on false premise of existent self and existent other, Buys into consensual reality	Wisdom, Open and nondual, nothing is singular independent or permanent, reality is "empty" of concepts
RELATIONSHIP	You revolve around "me", You serve me", self-centered, selfish	Uses others to shore up self, others are an extension of self, unhealthy merging	Aware of others, give and take, respects boundaries of self and other	Ego creates separate self, manipulates, misperceives others	Inter-dependent, vows to liberate others before self

THE TERM EGO IN CONTEXT	SLANG: COMMON USAGE	PSYCHO-DYNAMIC: UN-HEALTHY	PSYCHO-DYNAMIC: HEALTHY	BUDDHIST: PROBLEMS WITH EGO	BUDDHIST: EGOLESS-NESS
EMPATHY	“Clueless” about others, Oblivious, Condescending, thoughtless, inconsiderate	Incapable, projects unwanted self onto others, confluent	Can put self in others shoes, has emotional intelligence,	Inability to respond in present, idiot compassion is based on misperception that we can fix others	Understanding of suffering gives rise to compassion, lovingkindness for others and self
NEEDS	Greedy, stingy, Selfish, Self-satisfied, gluttonous, entitled	Gratified or ungratified narcissism, oral fixation, neurotic	Can meet needs, tolerates frustration	Desire driven, constant craving is unquenchable	Cessation of desire, free of craving, sees life as an exchange
FEAR	Cocky, brazen, swaggering, brash, Sees self as immortal	Fearless “as if” persona or engulfed in fear, defensive, Denies death and/or extreme fear of death	Manages fear and difficult emotions, tolerates ambiguity, Existential anxiety is normative experience	Fear driven, aggressive to protect sense of self, Denies and fears death, belief in permanent self	Relaxation with moment-to-moment awareness, Death as opportunity for awakening

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