

Self-consciousness versus self-knowledge

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The importance awarded to insight, resulting in true self-knowledge, is brought out by the essential advice given by spiritual teachers and philosophers throughout history: *‘Man know thyself.’* We are encouraged not only to get to know the *‘ego’* and the way it is motivated, which will lead to the possibility of change, but also knowledge of the *‘Self’*, awareness of our total being and of the Divine within. *“When you know yourselves, then you will be known, and you will understand that you are children of the living father. But if you do not know yourselves, then you dwell in poverty, and you are poverty.”* (Gospel of Thomas 3)

Whereas self-knowledge is essential, self-consciousness, however, forms a powerful barrier to knowledge of our deeper *‘self’* and blinds us to Ultimate Reality. Self-consciousness is of course *the* unique feature of humans, which distinguishes us, as far as we know, from other sentient beings. But the problem is that we use this ability in a restricted way: instead of it being a consciousness of the whole *‘self’*, we limit and focus it narrowly on all the surface thoughts of the *‘ego’*. We use self-consciousness then exclusively as a survival tool. Most of our thoughts then whirl around our own concerns in some way or another, trying to learn from our past and plan for the future for the sake of

survival. Our memories of the past can of course be a constructive help in shaping the present and planning for the future. But often the result is that we live only in the past and future and step over the present moment.

It is not that our 'ego' is not important. Especially in the first part of our life we depend on our 'ego' and we need it to be healthy and well-adapted. This is the first part of a development that Jung called the 'individuation' process. Moreover, we will always retain the need for the wisdom of the 'ego', as our survival skills will continue to be necessary for dealing maturely and realistically with both the external and internal world. But we need to remember that the 'ego' consciousness that we are rightly proud of is on the surface and ever-changing, determined by our current pre-occupations. It is the deeper permanent wisdom of the 'self' residing in the Unconscious that we need to bring to consciousness. We need an 'ego' development that goes hand in hand with the growing awareness of the spiritual 'self'. We need a shift in emphasis from the 'ego' to the 'self'.

The one-pointed attention of meditation helps this shift to take place. In leaving thoughts behind we leave the past and future behind and the mantra keeps us in the present moment. Then our 'ego' becomes a conscious centre that accepts unconscious material into its vision and that sees itself as an integral part of the whole. Then we operate from a balanced base using all of our resources, all our abilities conscious and unconscious, rational and intuitive.

This is the second part of the 'individuation' process where we come to a "synthesis of the conscious and unconscious elements in the personality". This true self-knowledge leading to psychological integration and wholeness is not for its own sake, but as a stepping stone to experiencing Ultimate Reality: "the reality we call God has first to be discovered in the human heart; moreover I cannot come to know God unless I know myself." (Meister Eckhart).

(Extract from 'Dancing with Your Shadow' – Kim Nataraja)

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