

It's Okay to Have a Big Ego

by Piya Tan

The most important fact I know about myself is that I have a BIG ego, and that's all I really have (that is "mine") at the moment. And I'm not sure what to do about it exactly.

I want to be a serious scholar, a skilled meditator, a calm wise person, even if it means having to deal with a big ego. I think that's what being a Buddhist is about. There are those who talk about big ego, and there are those who work with it.

Self-effacement is also a form of ego trip. In fact, I think it is one of the biggest ego trips. Self-effacement is to say "worthless" things about ourselves that we think other are likely to tell us, or to withhold some information about ourselves so that people do not know too much about us. A cunning strategy is to hint that we know what others are thinking. In other words, we are saying, "I'm actually better than you and putting you in your place!" Such strategy understandably is common where "face" and status are important.

So there seems to be no way out: be proud, you are ego-bound; be humble, you are ego-bound, too.

Even a streamwinner may have a "big" ego in the eyes of the unawakened. Arhats by definition have no ego. But would we know an arhat even if we met one? We are only in the habit of canonizing our own arhats.

In the Sanghati, kanna Sutta (It 92 = SD 24.10a), the Buddha says that even if we were to hold on to the corner of his robe and follow him step for step, we would still be far away from him, if we still have greed, hate or delusion (if we still have an ego). The teaching is that we cannot "look" for arhats, but we can only cultivate ourselves to BECOME one. Only then we would know another arhat.

The point is that we all have big egos, but there are those who know about it and those who do not.

The Buddha teaches that we will never be free from suffering, never even attain streamwinning, if we are stuck in selfishness. For selfishness spurs us to perform rituals, that is, get stuck in predictable behaviour which we think would bring us what we desire. Selfishness makes us superstitious, that is, we think that by changing our external environment, we can better our internal space. But it just does not work in these ways.

We begin to grow spiritually when we work at being less selfish, that is, to be more responsible for our actions and to be RESPONSIVE to others, even when they do not deserve it. We continue to grow when we examine the CONDITIONS behind the way we think and feel, and remove those negative conditions and cultivate wholesome ones. We grow closer to streamwinning when we work with our hearts and minds so that they become CALM AND CLEAR.

Our Dharma practice protects us from life's dangers like a safety airbag in a car. When the car crashes, the airbag inflates and safely cushions us. This happens whenever there is an accident, and our lives can have accidents when we least expect them (that is why they are called "accidents").

It is very troubling when someone with a big ego pretends that it is small. It is like remaining stuck behind the comfort of the fully inflated airbag after the car has smashed into a lamppost or wall. There is always the danger that the car may burst into flames.

In short, it's okay to have a big ego, but we must deal with it, and we should do this now and always, before any accident can happen.