

Understanding Self-Centredness

PEDRO OLIVEIRA

The Nature of the Desire Mind (*kāma-manas*)

In theosophical literature we find different approaches to the human constitution. A popular one, suggested by Madame H. P. Blavatsky, points to a nexus between mind and desire, which she called *kāma-manas*, the “desire mind”. The underlying idea is that desire influences — dominates — every single activity of the mind. It is also suggested that such a nexus will prevail within the human consciousness for many incarnations. At the core of it lies a strong, resilient, and robust sense of separate self — *ahamkāra*. The purpose of the present article is to understand the nature of this self and also why it has such a grip on human consciousness. The exploration will then move on to its effects on the work of the Theosophical Society (TS), at various levels.

The Seat of Human Conditioning

A sense of self has been considered, by many spiritual traditions, as well as by modern science, as the seat of human conditioning. All the influences, as well as all experiences, accumulated over many

years — many lifetimes, many incarnations — are stored in our sense of self. It acts as a converging point for them and it also moulds them into the way it sees the world, itself, and every new experience. This sense is strengthened by every new experience: it may recoil from challenging experiences and affirm itself from successful ones, but it always emerges stronger. As Annie Besant pointed out, the “I” creates the “Not-I” — the world, others, experiences — and is determined to keep this separation indefinitely and at all costs. The essence of self is, therefore, abiding separateness which is a process of profound isolation.

What is Self-Centredness?

Self-centredness is the notion that the separate self is real, and following from that, to assert its reality in daily life by maintaining that all its creations — opinions, knowledge, desires, claims, and personal will — are always right and not to be questioned. Self-centredness cannot understand life and its experiences except through separateness because it is absolutely convinced that it is the only

Mr Pedro Oliveira is a former Education Coordinator of the TS in Australia. He served at Adyar in the early 1990s as international Secretary, and later as Head of the Editorial Office.

Understanding Self-Centredness

reality. Again, it was Annie Besant who once said that only the blows of Karma can wake up the soul immersed in the unreality of separateness. In the Platonic tradition, self-centredness has been compared to living and being chained to the ground of a cave, never seeing the world outside. The only realities are the shadows projected on to the wall. It, therefore, involves the complete denial of relationship, being unable to recognize, accept, understand oneness with the other. It is the central human malady, and it has been wreaking havoc in the world for millennia.

It Grows with Lack of Awareness

Implied in the word “awareness” is the capacity to pay attention to an event, a person, or a subject without the intervening conditioning of self-centredness. It is highly regarded as a spiritual practice in many traditions, including Hindu, Buddhist, Sufi, and even the Christian tradition. It unfolds when the mind has been unburdened from the constant fixation on the self and its separative processes. It is like a light that allows one to see things as they really are in themselves, without judgment, comparison, or interpretation. It can become a path of immense spiritual discovery and realization. When there is no awareness, selfcentredness grows strong and numbs the mind with its psychologically suffocating effect. Every mindless and thoughtless act strengthens it and makes its eradication more difficult.

Its Dangerous and Deleterious Effects

The Buddha once compared the self

to a stranger who visits a householder in the middle of the night, asks for accommodation and food, subsequently kills the householder, and takes over his property. We tend to live our lives under the impression that the sense of separate self in us is not dangerous. We in fact tend to justify it. It is only when this sense of self explodes into full mode, in anger, hostility, animosity, and violence that we may realize there is nothing harmless about it. The dark depths and enduring consequences of separateness are still roaming the world, causing unprecedented suffering, and its origins come from the ingrained sense that the self is a separate, discreet, entity. Wars, family conflicts, disintegrating relationships, addictions, racism, ethnic cleansing, misogyny, cruelty to animals, are some of the fruits of self-centredness. All the great spiritual traditions proclaim this to be an illusion, while affirming that abiding unity is the perennial truth behind every manifestation of life.

Views from Hindu and Buddhist Sources

According to Monier-Monier Williams’ *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, *ahamkāra* is the “conception of one’s individuality, self-consciousness; the making of self, thinking of self, egotism; pride, haughtiness”. To give an idea of how serious this matter is, the *Concise Oxford English Dictionary* defines haughty as “arrogantly superior and disdainful”.

In the following passage of *Laghu-Yoga-Vāsishtha* (translated into English

Understanding Self-Centredness

by K. Narayanasvami Aiyar, The Adyar Library and Research Centre, 1980, p. 197) it is shown how the deeply abiding notion of “I” and “mine” prevents the realization of Wisdom and how it can be overcome:

If you wish to be the *akartís* (non-doer), then you should conduct yourself according to the ways of the world. There should not exist the idea of separateness in the heart. The moment the conception of “mine”, “I”, “you”, “I did it”, [and so on], arise in one, sorrow is engendered. Will persons be so foolish as to identify their self with the body? Such a conception is tantamount to (the raising up of) twenty-one hells. Even on the visitation of pain (in the body), do not confound the “I” with the body.

The wise would be as loath to identify their “I” with the body as flesh-eaters are unwilling to taste dog’s flesh. It is only because of the folly of the identification of “I” with the body that true *jñāna*-vision does not arise; but should it be dispelled, then the *jñāna* light will shine unobscured, like moonlight in the absence of clouds. Through such vision, you will be able to land safely on the other, beautiful shore of the ocean of rebirth. Having contemplated the fact that you are not a *kartís* (or doer) of anything and that there are no such differences as “I”, “thou”, and “others”, may you be the *akartís* with firm mind.

Ajahn Buddhadasa, in an article on “Essential Points of the Buddhist Teachings”, refers to *ahamkāra* as a “spiritual disease”:

In Pali, “I” is *atta* and “mine” is *attaniya*: or, if one uses the terms in the general use of Indian philosophy, *ahamkāra* meaning to have the feeling of “I” (stemming from the word *aham*, “I”), and *mamamkāra*, meaning to have the feeling of “mine” (stemming from the word *mama*, which means “mine”).

The feelings of *ahamkāra* and *mamamkāra* are so very dangerous that they are called the spiritual disease, and every branch of philosophy or *dhamma* in the Buddha’s time wanted to wipe them out. Even though they were followers of other teachings, they all had the same aim of wiping out *ahamkāra* and *mamamkāra*. . . .

This matter of “I” and “mine” is very hard to see. If you don’t really concentrate, you won’t be able to understand that it is the force behind *dukkha*, the force behind spiritual disease. <dharmanet.org/Buddhadasa.htm>.

In the following passage of *Majjhima Nikāya*, the Buddha explains to his Bhikkhus, with extraordinary clarity, what the sense of self is and how it is always followed by suffering:

When he attends unwisely in this way, one of six views arises in him. The view “self exists for me” arises in him as true and established; or the view “no self exists for me” arises in him as true and established; or the view “I perceive self with the self” arises in him as true and established; or the view “I perceive not-self with self” arises in him as true and established; or the view “I perceive self

Understanding Self-Centredness

with not-self” arises in him as true and established; or else he has some such view as this: “It is this self of mine that speaks and feels and experiences here and there the result of good and bad actions; but this self of mine is permanent, everlasting, eternal, not subject to change, and it will endure as long as eternity.”

This speculative view, bhikkhus, is called the thicket of views, the wilderness of views, the contortion of views, the vacillation of views, the fetter of views. Fettered by the fetter of views, the untaught ordinary person is not freed from birth, ageing, and death, from sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair; he is not freed from suffering, I say.

(*Sabbāsava Sutta*, All the Taints, 2.8¹)

Finally, the following verse of *The Voice of the Silence*, Fragment I, shows the role of image-making as an integral part of self-centred activity:

When waxing stronger, thy Soul glides forth from her secure retreat: and breaking loose from the protecting shrine, extends her silver thread and rushes onward; when beholding her image on the waves of Space she whispers, “This is I,” — declare, O Disciple, that thy soul is caught in the webs of delusion. (*Sakkāyaditthi*, “delusion” of personality.)

Views from Christian Mysticism

A well-known classic of Christian mysticism, *Theologia Germanica* (16th century), states: “So long as a man is seeking his own good, he does not seek what is best for him, and will never find it.” There

seems to be a spiritual resonance between this passage and the one in *Light on the Path*: “To work for self is to work for disappointment.” That which is good, as Plato taught, is never personal, but universal, encompassing all the myriad forms of life, all sentient beings.

What the personal self sees as “good” may be a combination of ambition, desire, achievement, and control. Such patterns do not harmonize with the deeper purpose of life as stated in *At the Feet of the Master*: to work for evolution and not for selfishness. As indicated by the Christian mystical text mentioned above, a self-centred pursuit makes it impossible to find what is truly good. In the many retellings of the Holy Grail story a similar teaching is given: only the worthy can find it.

Warnings from *The Mahatma Letters*

Any student who is familiar with the teachings contained in *The Mahatma Letters to A. P. Sinnett* will remember that, for the Mahatmas, a self-centred attitude was an impediment for a seeker to receive their guidance and help. They justified such a policy by explaining that as their entire lives are fully committed to save humanity from the malady of selfishness, they could not use their energy to reward selfish individuals. As we shall see, their warnings about the dangers of self-centredness are direct, precise, and uncompromising. The following was addressed to A. P. Sinnett:

Friend, beware of Pride and Egoism, two of the worst snares for the feet of him who aspires to climb the high paths of

Understanding Self-Centredness

Knowledge and Spirituality. You have opened a joint of your armour for the Dugpas — do not complain if they have found it out and wounded you there. (ML 66, p. 363, 3rd edition, TPH Adyar, 1962. (Chron. Ed., Letter No. 131)

A. O. Hume was a member of the Simla Eclectic Theosophical Society and was for a time a correspondent of the Mahatmas. During that process he became not only critical of them and their work, but also developed an attitude that led him to believe that he knew more than they did. The following quote addresses the nature of his attitude:

It is not that he is anxious to “do good” or “help the progress of the TS.” It is simply, believe me or not — *insatiable pride* in him; a ferocious, intense desire to feel and show to others that he is the “one elect”, that he *knows* that which all others are barely allowed to suspect. (ML 50, p. 282. (Chron. Ed., Letter No. 77))

Yet it is in the next quote that a deeper aspect of the implicit dangers of *ahamkāra* is revealed:

Self personality, vanity and conceit harboured in the *higher* principles are enormously more dangerous than the same defects inherent only in the lower physical nature of man. They are the breakers against which the cause of chelaship, in its probationary stage, is sure to be dashed to pieces unless the would-be disciple carries with him the white shield of perfect confidence and trust in those he would seek out through mount and vale to guide him

safely toward the light of Knowledge. (ML 64, p. 353. (Chron. Ed., Letter No. 134)

This extraordinary statement seems to indicate that at least in some of the higher human principles there exists the anchor for *ahamkāra* to act. It may not be difficult to understand that the principle of *manas* — mind — may have a role to play in this regard, for unless it is fully transformed and regenerated, deep within it lurks the notion of duality and separation, which are some of the fetters referred to in the Buddhist tradition. It has also been mentioned that such patterns may subsist in very subtle forms within the consciousness of the aspirant, yet they carry with them the potential for disaster, which only selfless awareness can detect and avoid.

The Impact of Self-Centredness on the TS

Whoever has worked at any decision-making level in the TS may recognize that most difficulties arise from irreducible positions, from points of view which are conflated with one’s sense of self-importance and the “rightness” of one’s views. Many years ago, at a brainstorming session during a speakers’ seminar in Australia, one participant declared that he was in the TS because “it needs me”. He left the Society a few short years later, apparently dissatisfied.

In a letter to a former international President a well-known Theosophist said that his point of view regarding the study of Theosophical books in the Society needed to be taken into account because

Understanding Self-Centredness

his “floodgates of perception had been opened”. Others, in more than one country, have maintained that the teachings of Krishnamurti should not be taken up in the TS because “he had failed as an Arhat”, while others say his teachings are paramount and should be given precedence in the Society. In all these instances little attention is given to what the essential work of the TS — human regeneration — while strong personal views on what should be emphasized are advanced, very often creating some unnecessary division in the body of the organization.

How Self-Centredness Ends

“Be humble, if thou would’st attain to Wisdom.

Be humbler still, when Wisdom thou hast mastered.”

This important statement from *The Voice of the Silence* (Fragment II) is not just a form of poetic license; it reflects an abiding, foundational truth: whatever progress is made on the Path, if it is indeed real progress, will always be informed by a genuine sense of humility — a steady, firm, real, and objective disengagement from a sense of separate self. As N. Sri Ram once wrote, “Love is the solvent of the little self.” Wisdom is just too big a prize to be put in the hands of those who still see any reality in a self that, by its very nature, denies the core truth that all life is one. The dawning of humility in the human soul marks the beginning of the end of self-centredness as it helps to dissolve the age-old web of unreality masquerading as “me”.

A Mind Transformed by Sacredness

“For every thing that lives is Holy.” Thus wrote William Blake in his poem *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. There is a profound similarity between Blake’s statement and the following passage from *The Mahatma Letters*:

But what is “Spirit” pure and impersonal per se? Is it possible that you should not have realized yet our meaning? Why, such a *Spirit* is a nonentity, a pure abstraction, an absolute blank to our senses — even to the most spiritual. It becomes *something* only in union with matter — hence it is always *something* since matter is infinite and indestructible and *non-existent* without Spirit which, in matter is *Life*.

(ML 23B (Chron. Ed., Letter No. 93B))

Every single manifestation of Life is sacred, as it is an expression of the uncreated Spirit. In its abiding sacredness, Life is always True, Good, and Beautiful. These qualities belong to Life in its inmost essence and are not affected by time and change. They are the *svarupa* of life, its own real form. Under the sway of *aham-kāra* the personal mind reifies life, turns it into a commodity, manipulates it, invents new forms of exploiting it, descends upon it the hand of mechanized cruelty, and renders the whole world a dark cemetery:

The world of today, in its mad career towards the unknown — which it is too ready to confound with the unknowable, whenever the problem eludes the grasp of the physicist — is rapidly progressing on the reverse, material plane of spirituality.

Understanding Self-Centredness

It has now become a vast arena — a true valley of discord and of eternal strife — a necropolis, wherein lie buried the highest and the most holy aspirations of our Spirit-Soul. (*The Secret Doctrine*, vol. I, Introductory, p. xxii.)

The teachings of the Perennial Wisdom suggest that, in spite of such heavily conditioning circumstances, the human mind can break free from the prison of selfishness. Not necessarily by *wanting* to break free, but by unlearning the many assumptions which were dictated to it by the power of selfishness. In this regard, there is no distinction between unlearning and enquiring. True enquiry (*vichāra*)

gradually dismantles the citadel of *aham-kāra* by observing every aspect of its illusory structure. Structure upon structure will fall until the mind remains in its illumined state, *manas taijasa*, when all its walls have collapsed.

The ending of self-centredness reveals the most ancient open secret: there is no difference between pure spiritual insight and love. “Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.” (1 Corinthians 12) Or, as Jalaluddin Rumi once said, “Love is the astrolabe of God’s mysteries”. Selfishness finds its natural end in a heart which has become a simple dwelling place for love.

Endnotes

1. *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha, A Translation of the Majjhima Nikāya*, Translated by Bhikkhu Ñānamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi, Wisdom Publications, Boston, 2009, pp. 92–93.

If we could put aside all theoretical, ideological, concepts of freedom and actually enquire whether our minds, yours and mine, can ever be free, freedom from dependence, psychologically, inwardly, freedom from fear, anxiety, the innumerable problems, both conscious as well as deeper layers of consciousness. Whether there can be complete psychological freedom, so that the human mind, being free from all problems can come upon something which is not of time, which is not put together by thought, or as an escape from the actual realities of daily existence."

J. Krishnamurti

Public Talk 2, London, England, 16 March 1969