

ego

To use it or lose it
– that is the question.

Many religions and spiritual schools emphasise the importance of selflessness. But we can't simply switch off the self! To begin cultivating a selfless attitude, we must initially use our ego in a way that will eventually lead us to getting beyond it.

In common usage, the words ego and self have roughly the same meaning. They refer to our perception of people's individuality, or separateness from one another – I am not you, you are not her, and so on.

BUT IN BUDDHIST THINKING, SUCH apparent boundaries are mere illusions, so the words ego and self represent phantom concepts. They are words which don't refer to anything 'real' that is 'out there', but to concepts which exist only inside our own minds.

In Buddhist terms, the essence of a person can be likened to the apparent emptiness of the space between atoms. At that essential level there is no separation between individuals – we're all part of the same big pool of empty space. Or, if you prefer, we're all part of the same pool of 'stuff', like waves crashing on the shoreline are just part of the same stuff as the rest of the ocean, and not separate from it, even though the waves appear to rise up and momentarily become distinct entities, before dissolving back into their source.

THE BUDDHA ENCOURAGED US TO LOOK beyond the illusory perception of separateness, to realise that the true essential nature of existence is characterised by emptiness, which involves no boundaries of form. Thus we have the Buddhist idea that form is emptiness, and emptiness is form.

That's all well and good, one might say, but irrelevant to me. After all, to call

the concept of self an illusion just seems to be an intellectual game. And if it's not a game, then it raises a difficult question: what are we supposed to actually do about our self being an illusion? It's unrealistic to expect anyone to just say 'okay, fine, so my self's an illusion,' just because some spiritually developed people with exceptional mental clarity have had that insight.

THIS QUESTION OF WHAT TO DO ABOUT OUR self has different answers for people at the different stages of their spiritual development. At this stage of my own development, the important issue to me is not how to rid myself of this illusion right now. Instead, my challenge is to use the illusion productively to keep myself practising the Buddha's Eightfold Path until such a time as I have naturally grown beyond that illusory perception of self. So it can be a natural progression to get beyond the ego by using it in the right way to start with.

On this journey, it helps to remember the difference between 'ego' and 'egotism'. The ego is a natural sense of self, albeit illusory, but one which is relatively harmless. On the other hand, 'egotism' involves a sense of self-importance, conceit and spiritual pride – like Bodhi in the cartoon above. Egotism is one of the easiest traps to fall into when moving along the path.

[a practical exercise] Firstly, next time you're feeling proud of yourself, just remember the proverb, 'Pride cometh before a fall'. Secondly, whenever you feel hard done by in life, just listen to the news. You'll quickly realise that most people in the world would gladly trade their problems for yours.

