Reconsidering Ego Death and the False Self

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Is it true? Must my ego die? Is my sense of self merely a false self that needs to be dissolved? Must I negate my ordinary humanity and reside only in the eternal present? Are these ideas helpful as I journey inward? Do they deepen my communion with my true nature?

I’ve recently been considering these often promoted notions of ego death, the false self, and staying only in the present, while inquiring into my experience on the spiritual path over the last 30 years. I’ve discovered something very different than what these ideas seem to be pointing to.

I long believed these ideas to be true and spent years obsessed and battling with my conditioning. My obsession became a kind of spiritual narcissism as I tried to transcend or eradicate my false self, to stay in the present and hold onto the experience of an open non-dual vastness as the only true reality. I believed and was told that simply by staying in the present, this vastness would eventually negate or dissolve my false, all too human, self that was apparently filled with negative traits and qualities, that was unreal and that had no essential value.

It’s true that over time, through the humble action of surrender, the seemingly separate “I” did seem to awaken from its confines and begin to live and function in the awareness of an all-encompassing cosmic vastness spoken of in non-dual teachings. My being did begin to function more fluidly, centered within a separate body, submersed in a quietude and vastness. I found that this did not negate or diminish, but rather enriched my ordinary humanness and even my personality. Over time, this process has stretched my ability to function as a finite self within this larger interconnected sense of being that seems confirmed by meaningful interactions and synchronicities in my daily life.

Often, though, during this process, I pursued the goal of dissolving permanently into the vastness or becoming able to stay only in the present, only to find myself back in a meditative non-functional haze struggling and in conflict with my ordinary humanity. I believed the spiritual ideology that the painful patterns developed in me through childhood dysfunction and trauma were the ego that must die, and that the self I took myself to be was false. I didn’t notice how this harshness in my relationship with myself created a deep and painful schism within me that would last for years.

Gradually, I recognized the various ways I stressed and hurt myself with negative judgments, beliefs and assumptions about my human flaws and frailties, the innocent and allegedly non-existent self I was trying to transcend. Through the rigors of psychotherapy and embodiment practices I began to recognize, with a sense of empathy and compassion, those non-optimal emotional and behavioral patterns that originated in my childhood.
I began to see and feel that I was more than my conditioned personality, bound by its shadow aspects that included addictive, self-sabotaging behaviors, toxic emotions, and painful self-hating inner talk. I began to notice how this negative or self-hating talk at times took the form of the non-dual teachings that told me these aspects of myself were the “ego” that needed to die. These shadow aspects of my character did obstruct the freedom and authenticity I was seeking through my spirituality. But these aspects were not an unreal ego needing to die or disappear. They were my disowned humanity in need of love and guidance.

There is a judgment in some spiritual circles that psychology and psychotherapy are inferior to spirituality. I was told that trying to understand the past and work on the false self were like rummaging around in a garbage can; that only by continual abiding in present awareness would the ego fall like a house of cards. By trying to enforce these non-dual ideas on myself, by trying to remain only in the present, I was imposing an ideology on my authentic experience. It was a ruthless enterprise, lacking in self-compassion and doomed to failure.

I began to recognize that much of my present behavior and emotions derive from patterns formed through past experiences. I found deep satisfaction both in the stillness of being and in the process of my ordinary life. I learned to feel life’s energy and discern life’s loving presence pouring through my body. But this alone did not dissolve my underlying anxiety and felt deficiencies.

Eventually my attempts to force my spiritual ideas on myself failed. Feeling lost and defeated, I found an exceptional therapist with a spiritual background. But I was suspicious of teachers and authority figures whom, for years, I had blindly followed. Their teachings had often reinforced rather than addressed my inner division and psychological formation. It took time for me to trust enough to submit myself to the rigors of the psychotherapeutic relationship.

In the course of psychotherapy I discovered that much of my suffering and confusion is a result of a lack of a necessary self-knowledge that only psychological introspection and investigation make possible. I began to recognize psychology as an essential aspect of spirituality. I learned how my family dynamics influenced some of the dysfunctional patterns of my character. I recognized how my addictive or compulsive behaviors, my elevated self-presentation, and my drive toward material and spiritual success covered deep and at times debilitating feelings of deficiency. I began to see my whole life as a defensive framework against debilitating feelings and beliefs about myself. I saw how I had been trying to prove, through social and spiritual achievements, that these negative beliefs about myself were not true. And I began to witness with compassionate understanding aspects of myself I had previously labeled my ego and believed merely needed to die.

For years I had imagined that if only I stayed in the presence of spiritual teachers, attended their talks, workshops or retreats, read their books, used their practices to impose their ideas on myself, by some magical spiritual process, some shaktipat or
transmission, I would experience sudden enlightenment. Then my deep feelings of insufficiency, the very sense of “me” itself, would disappear, and I would be free.

Now I learned the necessity of practicing self-love, self-care, boundaries and ethics, and the importance of accepting and embracing rather than denying and negating my humanity. I learned that I needed a maturity and wisdom that some from psychological understanding, growth and integration, not the magical spiritual/psychological bypass of the death of a supposedly false self. And I began to regard my human self, which included my personality, as an innocent being, a creation of the universe, worthy of love.

I found that love is an essential tool for recovering and maturing the innocent, young aspects of myself I had misperceived and rejected as being essentially flawed. I began to soberly feel and accept my human flaws and deficiencies, and to nourish myself with love instead of always seeking love and acceptance elsewhere. Gradually my capacity to accept and love myself grew.

This misperception and consequent rejection of my supposedly false self were the opposite of love. Yet they drove my spiritual life for years. This misperceived self - young, immature, innocent - could not heal and mature until I embraced it with loving awareness. This became my spiritual practice.

My attention gently began to turn toward actively loving myself unconditionally, no matter what I did, what I said, or how I felt. I began to tell myself things that I was waiting for others to say so that this deficient sense of myself would one day feel secure. It was hard to let go of the anti-ego, self-as-an-illusion teachings I had so long embraced. I now call it my awakening out of non-dual ideology.

The shift from feelings of intolerance and self-judgment to self-love and acceptance was profound. My practice of extending love towards aspects of myself that I had previously judged and rejected began a process of maturation, leading to a new sense of being at peace, at ease in my skin, and of feeling whole. This developed into a mature recognition of my self as a whole human being, not a false self that had to die or merely be transcended. Today I feel a greater capacity to experience the fluid sense of the finite within the infinite and also to accept my human pains and flaws. I experience the happiness that comes with my ability to accept and love it all.

This took years. There is no sudden integration. Becoming whole takes a lifetime, and perhaps more. I’m not suggesting that everyone must undergo psychotherapy. I am saying that deep psychological integration requires deep introspection and self-examination that includes the past as well as the present. When this is bypassed, the result is often an un-integrated or theoretical spirituality.

Now terms like “ego death”, “dissolving the false self,” and even “living only in the present”, seem naïve to me. They imply a sense of intolerance, even violence toward one’s humanity, especially towards the young, innocent aspects of self often beaten down by criticism and self-hate. These often-rejected aspects of self yearn for the love, the
caring presence, even the divinity of one’s own heart. The result of giving and receiving this within one’s self is a natural maturation through love.

I’ve discovered that it’s healthier and more spiritual to include and love “me” as I am, rather than try to eradicate “me.” Spiritual ideologies of self-negation are no remedy for core feelings of deficiency that often begin at a very young age. Such ideologies cannot remove the barriers and misperceptions that separate “me” from the deepest, most natural sense of myself and keep me from discovering my unique self and place in life. For me the spiritual process requires self-love, not self-annihilation. Instead of seeking a death or dissolution of a false self, I now enjoy a greater capacity to be at ease with myself and know the simple joy of being fully human.