

EGO – OUR ENEMY OR FRIEND?

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Received September 28 2015 • Revised October 31 2015 • Accepted November 1 2015

ABSTRACT

The ego is a concept that in yogic contexts is having a low value as something that has to be get rid of as soon as possible. Still, the ego or *ahamkāra* is a part of human structure, which has a determinative importance in our life. The paper aims at giving some thoughts to this question, since it may point to possible misconceptions.

Key words

Ego, *ahamkāra*, yoga-darśana, *sāmkhya darśana*, *jñāna*

1 Introduction

The ego – *ahamkāra* has a noble position in the *sāmkhya* model of the manifested world. It is born in the *Mahat*, the great principle that appeared as the result of the reflection or creative throb of *Purusa* and of the form giving processes belonging to *Prakṛti*. The literature on yoga sometimes mis-assesses the *ahamkāra* and shakes off this concept like the physicians used to do with the appendix, which they considered as “useless” and fit for removal.

2 The history and role of *ahamkāra*

The ego in general can be defined as the organized part of the personality structure that includes defensive, perceptual, cognitive, and executive functions. Conscious awareness resides in the ego, although not all of the operations of the ego are conscious. In yoga ego is termed as “*ahamkāra*”. *Ahamkāra* is an entity that in practical yoga is usually taken as an entity to be “eliminated”, “conquered”, etc. In fact *ahamkāra* is one of the *antahkaranas*, together with *buddhi*, *chitta* and *manas*. *Ahamkāra*, as we know it, “evolves” from *Mahat* (termed also as *Buddhi*). *Ahamkāra* gives rise also to the five *tanmatras*, which then give rise to the five *bhutas* (Hariharananda 1984). The appearance of the *ahamkāra* is linked to a two-fold process. A “creative” re-

flection of Purusa gives rise to the possibility of I-am-ness (*asmita*). A devolute of the Prakṛti is Mahat, the first “created” entity that has definable properties and which gives rise to ahamkāra. Thus ahamkāra does not have the possibility of direct contact with Purusa. From ahamkāra – on the *tāmasika* (inclined to “materialize”) side, the *tanmatras* (properties of *tattvas*) and *tattvas/bhutas* evolve. They give rise to substance-like appearances that we may perceive as “matter” (Friedman 2015). On the *sattvic* side, from ahamkāra the instruments that are needed for perceiving the world are “created”: *manas* – mind, five cognitive senses, and five active senses (Bharati 2015). This is all what we need to move around on this *Bhu-loka* (i.e. the “material” universe that we perceive), sphere of our existence, where we experience our present life. *Bhu-loka* is the seventh existential level, and according to mystical sources (Vay 1923), humans started their existence on the level of *Jana-loka*, which is positioned five existential levels higher. The ahamkāra, when it started accumulating information on the life of the individual, contained all the data needed for “creating” our inner and outer appearance. Even though the Patañjali’s *Yoga Sūtras* do not speak about this explicitly, the identification with the mind content (*vṛttis*) ties one to the “form and nature of *vṛttis*” (*Yoga Sūtras* I. 4). In verse I. 5 Patañjali speaks about *vṛttis* that produce *samskāras*. The *vṛttis* are formed by individual *kleśas*, “afflictions”, that stem from *karmāśaya* – the “domain of karmas”. *Samskāras*, the “unconsciously stored past impressions”, force the *vāsanās* – personal propensities – to appear (Bharati 2015). In this way Patañjali describes an analogous

stream of modifications to the one mentioned above.

To sum it up, the ahamkāra (ego) contains all the energies and information needed for creating an individual appearance. For every life span there is a portion of *karma* – effects of past lives – that have to be processed. By this it is meant that we are born into a pre-arranged environment – regarding social aspects (parents, family, colleagues, friends, etc.), spatial aspects (where are we born), temporal aspects (when are we born), etc. This is done from a position that takes time as a variable, which makes it possible to predict the type of events and situations, into which one is “led by the force of karma”, in order to learn to have the proper reactions that would not cause new karma to be formed and would free us from the pressure of past karmas. The information, which is channelled through ahamkāra, creates a personality type, a bodily outlook etc., using the *sattvic* instruments mentioned earlier. An even greater wonder is the “environment” where we are seamlessly inserted for a given life. Here every event that relates to us is shared by others and vice versa.

Knowing this, we should approach our own ahamkāra with awe. All the problematic *vāsanās* as well as the positive ones projected by the ahamkāra into the perceptible area of inner and outer events, are simply the expression of our (immediate or distant) past and when our relevant karma segment becomes ready for our understanding it, our perception related filters allow at first to feel the issue that is there to be solved and later – when we are ready to untangle our attention

from them, we can move towards solutions and absolutions.

Sri Ramana Gita (Ganapati Muni 1966, VII. 9–10) tells about this the following: “One whose mind is pure through *upasana* or other means, or by the merit of his deeds in past lives, whose mind perceives the imperfections of the body and sense objects and feels utter distaste whenever his mind has to function among sense objects and who realizes that the body is impermanent, he is said to be a fit person for *Self-enquiry*.”

Here the element of “distaste” is given, but is it not necessarily a negative sign, only the said person is interested in the discovery of the source of his consciousness, and thus all the rest are simply not interesting for him.

The same feeling is described in *Aparokshanubhuti* (Shankaracharya 1982, V. 4): “The indifference with which one treats the excreta of a crow – such an indifference to all objects of enjoyment from the realm of Brahma to this world (in view of their perishable nature) is verily called *vairāgya*.”

If our system gets ready for such dive inside, then anything else is a simple distraction which cannot really attract our attention and lessen the energy which we use for getting the chitta (i.e. working space of mind) still, so that it becomes transparent and we can realize what is beyond it. [Note: this paper pertracts only selected aspects of this process.]

Thus all our perceived properties – pleasant or unpleasant, kind, or arrogant, etc. – are only surface ripples on the scene projected by our ahamkāra (see Figure 1). When they no longer bind our energies, they become

powerless and the less “person-specific” aspects of I-am-ness get manifested.

Here the problem of free will may come to mind. If we are presented with such a well-designed set of life situations, what can we do about it? [Note: A short discussion on some aspects of this issue is given in the BBC documentary “Do you really make your own decisions”, but it discusses the issue in a “horizontal” way, not considering the “vertical” aspects displayed in Figure 1.] Is it something that we can influence? The dialogue with Ramesh Balsekar (Timčák 2015) indicates that we can rely on this “karmic arrangement” that provides us with all, what we need for this life and devote attention to recognizing and resolving the counter-productive reactions coming from our *vāsanās*.

Still, what can we do as regards “pulverizing the ego”, “annihilation of the ego”, etc.? In fact, from the above it follows that should the ahamkāra be annihilated, we – as we know ourselves – would cease to exist as all the information on us as an individual would get demodulated. When pondering upon this, whether it is good or bad, we can assume that as the ahamkāra does not have the possibility to come to direct contact with Purusa, we would perhaps exist only as a deleted file in a computer. We could get perhaps undeleted on the level of Mahat, but some of our history could be already lost. Thus our life would lose its justification. In any case we would disappear from the Bhu-loka and get into a space of frozen energy field, where those are finding themselves, who want to get out of the universal flow of life (Vay 1923).

The Chinese “*Jesus Sutras*” from the seventh

century (Palmer 2001, *The Sutra of Cause, Effect and Salvation* 4:17–20) advises: “But to change your karma, you must exist in this physical world. A person can only change his karma residue by being born again into this world. Do good and you will live to be in the world beyond this world. The other world can be found by doing acts of karma in this life, by living properly in this world.”

Thus the key to a meaningful life is not to “pulverize” the ego, but to understand its messages, the life situations, which it co-creates and to learn to act in a way that is dharmic, i.e. does not create new karma. In this way we can slowly find the way to our real home – the Jana-loka. Therefore we can say that the ahamkāra is our friend and guardian, who coaches us through countless lives until we learn to flow with the currents of universal life that relies on the information and energy coming from That which alone IS.

This is also a way, how we can understand the term *samādhi* – one of the highest goals of yoga training. *Samādhi*, in the above context, does not mean that the ahamkāra is dissolved, but that all the energies and information that bar the re-emergence of the Ultimate state of living in full consciousness of the Being-Consciousness-Bliss (*Sat-Chit-Ānanda*) are cleared and what emerges is accepting any life processes that are projected by the ahamkāra, perceiving it as a “play of shadows” and never losing the anchoring in the *Sat-Chit-Ānanda*. This is what the *Yoga Sūtras* describe in I. 3. “Then (upon dissolution of *vrttis*) the seer’s remaining in his own nature (is maintained)” (Bharati 2015). *Sri Ramana Gita* describes this state as

“[t]he enlightened one (*jñāni*) is unfathomable; he abides always in the Self (*Ātman*) only. He does not consider the universe as unreal, or himself different from the universe (*vishva*)” (Ganapati Muni 1966, I. 11). So the ahamkāra becomes a servant, who will serve the *jñāni* in whatever way it needs to happen and never appears as a “master of events”.

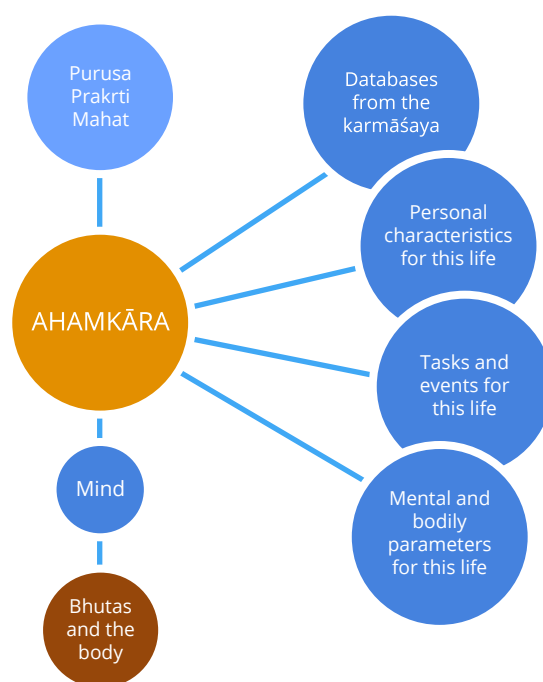


Figure 1. The way how ahamkāra comes into existence and how it is the key of our manifested existence. (Click to enlarge)

3 Conclusion

Ahamkāra is not at fault when we do things which are improper or do not fit into the “world of a yogi or yoga practitioner – *sādhaka*”. Its role is to keep, update and present information, which the personalized consciousness either identifies with, or keeps the position of witness, which can let those things and processes to happen, that are dharmic, i.e. do not produce new karma and are beneficial to

any given situation. So it is a state described in the *Yoga Sūtras* I. 3, in *Sri Ramana Gīta* and other yoga texts. Therefore it is imperative to come to an understanding what ahamkāra is doing for us and learn the lessons presented by it internally and externally. Then we are able to realize the real wonder of all beings seamlessly woven into the manifested world on the level of Bhu-loka [note: this leads to real *Īśvarapranidhāna*] and beyond.

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This article is published in Spirituality Studies 1 (2) Fall 2015. To read this issue please click on the image below:

