

Week 6. THE “I”: MY GIFT AND WORK AS A PARENT

HANDOUT 4: An Integral Evolutionary Context



*Transcription of the section from Week 2
Teaching Session on the Arc of Life*

The Great Arc Of Life – Developing, Embracing & Transcending Identification With Our Ego

Let’s look a bit deeper into what our human journey and our parenting look like when we consider our journey to be ongoing. I’ll be referring frequently to the diagram titled “Journey to Wholeness” (you can find it as a handout in the course materials of this week). This diagram is adapted from and was inspired by Ken Wilber’s “life cycle of development”, in which his model of human development describes the human life cycle as consisting of an outward arc of personal ego development, followed by an inward arc of psycho-spiritual development.

I’ll begin with explaining the diagram above (please keep in mind that it’s a humble attempt to put into diagram form a journey that is way more immense, complex and mysterious than could ever be held in a simple diagram!).

The dark orange layer represents our ego-self, and the black curve represents the degree of *identification we have with this distinct, constructed, separate sense of self* (which is made visible in the varying degrees of thickness of this black line). So, the thicker the black line, the stronger our identification with our ego-self.

The **term ego** is used in so many ways; I want to take a moment to look at this and also to clarify what I mean here. And I think one of the reasons the term ego is used in so many different ways depends largely on which lens we are looking through.

When we look through a psychological lens, the ego is a necessary, natural, organizing function of individual personhood. We need it – this distinct sense of “I” of “me” – to navigate space-time. When we watch children grow, we can see what an essential and beautiful part of the human journey it is, when our child begins to say “me” “mine” with the hugest grin of discovery on her face! The development of ego represents a journey of differentiation (I am different from my parents and others) and of integration (bringing different parts of myself together, in relationship to one another (my impulsive self with my moral self, for example).

When looked at through a spiritual lens, however, the ego is often experienced and seen as the biggest obstacle to our awakening, as that part in ourselves that doesn’t want to grow up, that wants things to remain the same, that is self-concerned above all else, and that will at all costs, protect itself, defend its separate identity and its habits, and keep refining its “self sculpture”. It is understood as that part of ourselves that is limited, that likes the known, the secure, and that doesn’t want to take responsibility for itself.

When looking at “ego” thru an integral lens, we can make space for *all* of these interpretations... we acknowledge the developmental and functional importance of the ego self, while understanding that, even as each of us, as we grow up, have and need a distinct individual self sense, we are also undeniably connected beyond all our individual selves. And that the KEY to experiencing and being available to this *both/and* is to evolve beyond our IDENTIFICATION with our separate sense of self. So, it’s not the separate self sense that’s the problem, it’s the *identification with it* that can keep us stuck in a limited, self-centered approach to life. It’s like if I need a coat to weather the storms of life, to keep me dry and protected, to put things in its pockets that are useful, but then get confused with thinking that I am the coat, rather than the person wearing the coat. Throwing the coat away would not be a good idea, but confusing who I

am with the coat is also not a good idea. Does that make sense? It gets more complicated than this, because that coat also tends to pick up a whole bunch of habits that can really trip me up over time... for example, when our daughter began to understand the concept of future, she simultaneously started to worry more... will we have enough food for papa when we comes home, let's save some for him... so developing a separate sense of self can certainly become a magnet for all kinds of fears... if I am separate then who is going to look out for me? Am I against others? Are they against me? Is there enough for me? This tendency could perhaps be likened to the coat becoming some heavy armor, which obviously gets rather clunky to live in and relate with.

For now, let's just keep in mind that the development of the ego is a necessary part of the human journey, but not the end of it, that it offers gifts of distinction, structure and functionality, but that when we confuse the ego with who we truly are and with our further evolutionary potential, we are fall short of living into our full potential. Also, let's keep in mind that while the ego has many healthy functions, it is also a magnet for all kinds of fears and limitations and illusions. And that who we truly are is not the coat (and definitely not the armor), but the person inside the coat! Especially when parenting it's important to keep all these various dimensions of self in mind, particularly because you are accompanying another person into and through the early part of their human experience, while keeping the whole journey and where you are at along the path, in mind.

So: Translated in the diagram... when we evolve from the outward arc to the inward arc, the ego remains as a healthy functional part of ourselves that helps us navigate this life, that provides us with healthy self boundaries, and with useful survival instincts. What shifts is our identification with this dimension of our self; rather than thinking that is all that we are, we gradually dis-identify from our ego-self, and make more space for our essential, for our authentic self to express itself. We also free ourselves from the unnecessary baggage that the ego-self picks up, the unnecessary fears and beliefs that can keep us stuck and stagnant. The concentric circles represent the *deeper dimensions of our self* – our soul, our spirit, and then in purple, ALL of who we are, have been and are becoming, enfolded in the Ground of Being (Spirit / God). These deeper dimensions in each of us, also in children no matter their age, are present at all times. They don't

need to get developed or constructed. What do develop as we evolve are the *expressions* of our soul and spirit, and our *conscious connection* with these parts of our being.

OK, so let's unpack this a bit more... I especially want to highlight two main components in the diagram, and look at how they connect to parenting as a spiritual practice. We'll begin at the very beginning of the outward arc (just to the left of the bottom of the circle. Note: this is when a child is embodied, what happens before is a whole other topic to explore). Following the journey in our mother's womb, we emerge into fresh air, the forces of gravity no longer cushioned by the amniotic fluid, and here we are! A newborn; a newly born human being. **Just landed and starting out – and entering the pre-egoic phase of our life on earth – this time in our growth before we even “think we know who we are”.**

With our first actual steps still months away, we begin our travels on this planet, this time cushioned in the embrace of parents, family and friends. And for the first few months, we reside in what is often called an “undifferentiated” state. We make no difference yet between “me” and “everything else”. In other words, we are merged with the world, the lines between “me” and “others” are diffused and nebulous. There is not yet a clearly defined sense of “me”. This separate self-sense takes a while to develop. During this undifferentiated phase, we simply *are* – resting and locked into the present moment for better and for worse. So, for example, when our diaper is changed, and we are rested, loved, and fed... all is well! On the other hand, when we are left alone, tired, have a wet diaper or are hungry, everything feels very wrong, and there's not much we can do about that except wail. So yes, we are present, but not consciously present. We're locked into the present moment, and so our sense of well-being completely depends on our present circumstances. This is a really key distinction: the infant state of being tied into and defined by the present moment leads some parents to think they have a little “Buddha” before them. Not so, alas! There's some work ahead. Buddha-hood (or Christ consciousness) is a much later stage of consciousness we may grow into as we eventually make our way into the Inward Arc of Life and keep evolving. It is not something we are born with. As said, the difference between the state of presence an infant manifests versus the presence of a Buddha-mind is that the infant

is locked into the present moment (has no choice in the matter), whereas the awakened sage consciously chooses to be present, with full awareness of past, present, future, and eternity.

So, here's the first of the two main components I want to highlight with this diagram. As parents we're presented with a very unique opportunity during this pre-egoic phase of our child's life: It's the chance to glimpse our child's essential nature, before it gets covered up with layers of ego-self. It really is an amazing window in time for you to see, connect with and recognize your child's true self. For even as the journey of developing consciousness in this embodied form lies in its very beginnings, your child already has a soul and a spirit, as much as a mind and a body ('body' includes emotional body; also, we're speaking here of ever-present states of being, not stages of development).

These deeper, more subtle dimensions of your child don't need to be built. They're already there, and can be recognized by you, and interacted with. Soul to soul recognition can take place. This doesn't require your child to be aware of her soul (and spirit). Your child simply is, and you get to witness and connect at this level by bringing your attention, your presence and receptivity to it! And because there is not yet an ego-self covering up the deeper dimensions in your child, they are often easier to perceive and connect with. This happens quite frequently without us even trying. Have you noticed how drawn people are to connecting with a newborn? And how, with just a little attentiveness, they find themselves becoming more silent, receptive, and present? In addition to our innate human curiosity, our delight and the nurturing tendencies that arise in the presence of little ones, we're attracted by the authentic presence a newborn exudes. A newborn simply rests in his essential self. He's not trying to be someone. He's not trying to please or impress you. He is simply *being*. Which in and of itself is extremely refreshing, relaxing and precious to be around! It also brings out this quality in ourselves. So for us as parents, this is a time when we, through connecting with and resting in our deeper self, can recognize and be present with our new child's Essence.

Beyond the obvious immediate delight this offers, this window of opportunity to truly see your child, has implications for your entire parenting journey. What you see and recognize now in your infant, her unmediated core self, remains there for you to connect and engage with, even as your child becomes busy developing her frontal self (or ego-self, as we called it earlier). And by consciously engaging in this way, you as the parent can offer your seeing and knowing of your child's deeper self as a reference point *throughout* your child's life, both for yourself and your child. In doing so you can help your child remain stay connected experientially (not consciously) with her deeper self, in this way offering her a reference point also, which in time, as she grows up, she can gradually become conscious of.

So that's one of the two main components of this diagram I wanted to bring our attention to – the ***ever-present dimension of our child's soul***, and the precious window we have in this early stage of our child's life to see and be present to his soul, and to continue connecting with our child in this way even as he/she begins the journey of ego development. This window is especially present till 4-5 months, which is one reason why we encourage parents, if at all possible, to take at least the first 5 weeks after birth off, simply to become family, to bond, to gaze in each other eyes, to fully immerse yourselves in the new configuration of beings you have become.

The second component then is ***the egoic phase***; this stretch in our human journey of *building a separate distinct sense of self*, and the increasing degree of identification with this ego-self. Gradually your baby begins to differentiate between “me” and “everything else”, and over time the emerging sense of a distinct, separate self becomes more defined and more robust. This happens first physically, then emotionally, and then cognitively. The first signs of this differentiation are noticeable as early as 2-3 months when your child realizes through direct sensory experience that her hand and feet belong to herself, that mama's hand and feet belong to mama, and that tasting and shaking the rattle offers very different sensations than sucking on and shaking her own toes. We'll discuss this further, this journey of gradual differentiation and integration in our children, in module 3.

As said earlier, this phase is represented by the black curve in the diagram. For some people, their life journey remains within the outward arc, within the realm of personal ego development. Sometimes people touch in with their deeper self on their death-bed, or have glimpses here and there sprinkled throughout their life, moments of depth and authenticity. And while, as mentioned earlier, the ego often gets a bad rap in spiritual circles, and is seen as the greatest obstacle in our path to awakening, healthy ego development is a necessary and integral part of our growing up. It's a time of "becoming me" – of figuring out that I'm different and distinct from others, a time of sculpting and refining who I think myself to be. During this phase we gather many experiences, we develop skills, we learn to navigate and try to make sense of ourselves and the world, we learn to interact and to adjust, to become socially accepted and pleasant, to protect ourselves, to know where I end and you begin, to survive, to be productive. Building an ego is no small feat. At the height of this ego-phase (where the black curve is at its thickest), we may have rare glimpses of the deeper authentic dimensions in ourselves, but generally we fully identify with our built-up personality and life story.

So what is our job as parents in relation to *this* phase? With the emerging mental differentiation and the growing use of language around age two, our child's sense of being a separate self emerges, and the journey of ego building has truly begun.ⁱ This emerging self-image that's formed, further differentiated, and increasingly identified with as an act of self-preservation and self-adaptation may one day be released and space made for the underlying essential self to emerge (represented in the Inward Arc). But for now, this budding ego is the next step for the child to take. During this period of a person's life, during the outward arc, the ego could actually be viewed as the hero/heroine, rather than as the obstacle to growth and flourishing.

As said earlier, from a spiritual perspective one may be tempted to bypass this stage, wish our kids didn't have to get so fully immersed in it, especially when we later on in life find out just how very tricky it is to disengage from this ego-identity, how deeply familiarized, conditioned, and immersed we've become with it ourselves. But, as evidenced by developmental research, no stage of development can be skipped. There are no shortcuts. The way is *through*, not around or over!

Also, if we watch our children, they're often delighting in this part of the trek, as we have too. It is theirs to explore and walk. They stand in front of the mirror and try out various postures, they pick up gestures and expressions and try them out on the soccer field. They are busy becoming somebody. And while they have to learn to deal with fear, possible rejection, belonging or not belonging, and all the challenges of being a separate somebody, they also have a lot of fun refining their selfhood sculpture. I'll never forget a 13-year old friend chiming into a conversation I was having with her mother. We were discussing the search for our authentic drive, having lost our buy-in to our egoic one, and she contributed, "Oh yes, I know that the ego's ultimately not It, but for now, I'm all about ego and I love it!" We laughed together, sharing in a moment of celebrating the various stages we found ourselves at, knowing they all make up one great spiral.

The emerging egoic self-image must run its course. One day, as our child grows into an adult, she may choose to increasingly dis-identify from her personal self, and journey into the Inward Arc, consciously shifting her identity to rest in her ever-present, underlying Essential Self. Which is, from a spiritual point of view, one of the greatest gifts of the ego-journey: it brings us to a place of conscious choice. I'm always amazed by this – both the burden and the gift of choice in this matter. I do think that in considering Parenting as a Spiritual Practice we can also offer our children our witnessing and discernment, and help them not become as thickly identified with their ego. Our daughter, Adonia, is in the middle of exploring and building her frontal constructed self, she's often having a fun goofing around with airs and gestures, and once in a while I watch her and say, "You know that's not really you, right?" She nods, and responds, "Of course I know, I'm just having fun."

So, our job as parents, when considering this evolutionary arc, is **twofold**:

- 1) We recognize and connect with our **child's true self**, his/her core essential self. In this way we help our child stay in touch experientially with who he or she *really* is (again, this doesn't require our child to be conscious of her deeper self, but simply enables her to be seen, heard, related to, recognized and loved in this way). Basically we make space, we hold space for her true nature to

be, *throughout* her journey. The most direct way to do that is by dropping into our authentic self ourselves. Which sometimes happens just like that, and also, to be a reliable and consistent gesture, takes discernment and practice within ourselves (we'll talk about that in a few weeks). As our child gets older, we can also engage in reflective conversations with them around this topic, acknowledging their deeper self, and gently, here and there, reminding them that their job is to be themselves, not someone else. Through this our sense is that the inner readiness to shift from the Outward to the Inward Arc may potentially come much sooner than has usually been the case... as early as 16-18 years old.

The human soul inclines toward life in the spirit. To be inwardly aware of the reality of such a life and know something about this life, which goes beyond physical life – this gives us our true worth. ... And it will be the concern of those who consider the education of children to be a serious matter not to let children grow up in such a way that they live only with external and material ideas, but to convey to them ideas of another world.

Steiner, 1994: 79, *The Inner Nature of Man*

- 2) The second piece is that, while this leg of the human journey can't (and shouldn't) be by-passed, and we can't save our children the trouble of first building an ego only to have to learn to dis-identify with it further on down the road, what we can do is **help our children build a pleasant, well-functioning ego**, one that will serve them well in their growth and health. We can offer them experiences of being accommodated, as well as challenge them to adjust to circumstances. We can help them develop emotional intelligence, and, even if it takes a long time for them to really get this, we can model and encourage them to make use of choice – we can show them that they don't have to be a victim of circumstance but can reach into a place of empowerment within themselves, as is age-appropriately possible. We can help them navigate the heavier trappings of the ego-self... such as fear, envy, lack, limitation, drama and moodiness, and support them in wearing the ego like a useful light coat instead of clunky armor. And by understanding the stages of growth our children move through, we can have a clearer sense of what to expect, we can honor each stretch of the journey, and be less inclined to over or underestimate them.

Before moving on, I invite you touch in with yourself, to reflect on where you might be along this Arc of Life. There's no place you are supposed to be. Engaging in Parenting as a Spiritual Practice involves us growing both vertically (taking our next steps) as well as horizontally (healthy integration and expression of your self every step of the way). When we place ourselves in an evolutionary arc, we can see that we have all come a long ways along the path, resting on the shoulders of so much that has come before us. And we all still have a long ways to go! We can learn and be inspired by others who are further along the path. We can share insights and experience with those who we are invited to accompany and support, or teach and guide. I find this contemplation leaves me in a humbled and excited place, as I feel into this incredibly vast life trajectory, this feeling of being on an ongoing journey, appreciating where I've come to and wondering what's next. Where have I come from? What might I need to integrate, scoop up and bring along that I have left behind? What would I best leave behind? What do I rejoice in and express now? And what's my next step?

ⁱ Or in Frances Vaughan's words, "the self becomes increasingly identified with the verbal ego-mind." (2000, p. 27 Vaughan, Frances. *The Inward Arc: Healing in Psychotherapy and Spirituality*). Before this, in the prepersonal stages of development, the rudimentary ego is present and developing, but here we use the term *ego* in relation to the child's growing capacity to form an egoic self-concept that transcends exclusive identification with the body and emotions. It is important to note that we are speaking here of the *beginning* of this process of ego building.