

Double Trouble by Bob Ferguson

The great difficulty in spiritual work is the ego. Whatever efforts or plans we devise to get beyond ourselves are started and carried out by that which we wish to transcend, and have the undesired effect of strengthening the very obstacle we seek to overcome. This is made even more insidious by the ego's natural ability to split itself in two, and thus ceaselessly chase its own tail while proclaiming its progress. Ego (ego1) as problem solver berates itself (ego2) as problem creator, and around and around we go. Any system or discipline is subject to the ego's trickery, but struggle we must. The very tension we produce from the conflict, if stored and transmuted, may provide the catalyst for an unexpected change.

Noticing two distinct camps in the field of spiritual endeavor over the years, I've come to see that a two-pronged approach yields the quickest and best results. Let's take a look at these two methods, their strengths and weaknesses, and why both are necessary.

The first could be described as a passive listening, exemplified by systems such as Subud. When Bennett says, "*There is one Source of Help that stands beside and abides within us. All that we have to do is to learn how to ask and to receive the help that is offered.*", this is what he refers to. Many teachers have expounded the merits of what might be called 'direct looking at the Source.' [Douglas Harding's](#) system of looking at the looker, of seeing what you are looking out of, is another example. It has been said that realization dawns in a quiescent mind, one that is not filled with 'knowing,' but is empty and sees its own nothingness. Gurdjieff said that we must start from passive *Do* (first note of the scale), meaning we cannot begin by projecting our destination and then going about making that desire-concept manifest. We must look for what IS, not for what we think we want or desire. This works on the ego's insistence that it 'knows' and is in charge as the doer, and undermines its authority.



Photo: Bob Ferguson

While the above illustrates the good side of direct seeing, it also shows the inevitable downside. Many use this passive looking as an excuse to keep spiritual work only in the head, and therefore not allow any real change. They can become addicted to such platitudes as 'there is nothing to be done, for there is no doer, so just relax' and thus take themselves out of the search too early. The ego will grab hold of such sayings and use them to keep its power, and the game is soon over. We must hold tension if we wish to transcend our present state, not give in to laziness or fear. If our 'looking' is only in the thoughts and memory, no change occurs. If what we see is not admitted, our seeing stays in the head, and ignores the heart.

The second prong is the opposite of the above, being a psychological analysis of the mind. One begins to observe oneself, one's actions, thoughts, and motivations. Slowly, a picture of how one's head is put together comes into focus. We begin to see we are not what we thought we

were, but are mechanical, a machine, governed by unconscious factors that don't always have our best interest at heart. We also see how our fellows are built the same, and see their flounderings as mirrors of our own. This also plays against our belief that we are an individual in charge of our actions, and distinct from all others. We see instead that we are just a bundle of reactions built up by life, and have no real being in a true sense. This too goes against the ego's insistence on being the real "I," capable and always right.

Here again, the danger lies in two facets. First, we may not take the above personally, but keep it safely tucked away in the intellect. We may see how the personality in others is flawed, and talk about our own, but somehow always manage to rationalize it away as regards ourselves. The ego will not let it go too deep, but keep it in the realm of theory and the 'other guy.' The saying 'the truth shall set you free, but first will make you miserable' applies here too, as well as to the path of direct looking. If we do not take what we see about ourselves to heart, if we cannot be self-honest, the ego will remain untouched. No pain, no gain.

The other trouble is that if we do not bring honesty and direct looking into play with our observations of self, we may come to like the game, and thus engage in a different form of tail-chasing: that of endlessly analyzing ourselves. We can also fall into the trap of becoming negative and judgmental, thinking that the search is about labeling and building hierarchies, in which we are always above and beyond. This is ego at its best, is tiring, and without good end.

The marriage of reason and intuition brings forth fruit. Any path that promises realization without loss of self, meaning difficulty and suffering, should be considered circumspect. And any system which promises to find Truth through the thinking mind only should be dealt with just as warily. While some have made the trip using only one of these paths, most of us do not have the time and endless energy this may require. The ego's traps of desire and fear, pride and self-pity, can take any method and use it to take us farther afield. We need all the help we can get, use what you have.