

2 Effective Ways to Fight your Ego, that Dangerous Enemy Within

Badi Shams

No matter how we succeed in any field, a great danger exists within us all—the human ego. That common inner enemy has destroyed the relationships, careers and lives of millions.

Our ego—the insistent, grasping, demanding lower self inside everyone—can make a lifetime of achievements disappear in an instant. It can manifest itself in the form of a gesture, a look, a word or an action, but the end result is often the same.

When the ego dominates our behavior, it usually results in a victory for negativity and the forces of passivity or evil. Like a volcano ready to erupt, our egos constantly require the supervision of our higher, more spiritual nature.

The Baha'i Faith has numerous spiritual teachings that prepare us to face this lifelong test. The Baha'i writings differentiate between our two selves: our animal, material or lower nature—that insistent self we call the ego—and our spiritual, divine or higher nature:

In man there are two natures; his spiritual or higher nature and his material or lower nature. In one he approaches God, in the other he lives for the world alone. Signs of both these natures are to be found in man. In his material aspects he expresses untruth, cruelty and injustice; all these are the outcomes of his lower nature. The attributes of his divine nature are shown forth in love, mercy, kindness, truth and justice, one and all being expressions of his higher nature. Every good habit, every noble quality belongs to man's spiritual nature, whereas all his imperfections and sinful actions are born of his material nature. – Abdu'l-Baha, *Paris Talks*, p. 60.

We can find in our human history and the history of different religions many examples of how this hidden enemy victimized even good-hearted and spiritual men and women, destroying the great achievements earned in a lifetime. It has been the cause of the downfall of a great many leaders and learners in all walks of life. They could not see it coming or recognize its imminent danger until it was too late.

So being aware of the demands of our egos, and recognizing its signs, offer ways of dealing with it and finding ways to combat it or to keep it under control. This awareness is essential for those who want to progress in life both materially and spiritually, presenting us with a lifelong conversation that we have to continually have with ourselves:

A man may converse with the ego within him saying: “May I do this? Would it be advisable for me to do this work?” Such as this is conversation with the higher self. – Abdu'l-Baha, *Paris Talks*, p. 179.

We can see from this Baha'i approach that the human ego is not necessarily always a negative force—but like a spirited animal that can injure us if not kept under control, it requires careful vigilance.

Great religious figures, philosophers, poets and people of vision such as Rumi have recognized that truth, and warned us to be aware of this invisible and elusive enemy:

Your worst enemy is hiding within yourself, and that enemy is your “nafs” (self) or false ego. – Rumi

Though one should conquer a 1000 times a 1000 men in battle, he who conquers his own self is the greatest of all conquerors. – Gautama Buddha

The lowliest and most abject of all things holdeth sway over thee, and that is none other than self and passion, which have ever been reprehensible. – Baha’u’llah, *The Summons of the Lord of Hosts*, p. 170.

Though very difficult, there are ways that insistent self can be contained and subordinated with the help of two age-old methods used by different spiritual disciplines:

1. Self-knowledge

Because it lets us take an inventory of our minds and souls, with honesty and the intention of discovering more about who you truly are, self-knowledge represents a valuable tool for controlling the ego. It allows us to discover what abilities we have to face our insistent self; and also helps us find the areas where we will likely be tested, where possibilities of failure exist. This ongoing process of self-examination requires the courage to face ourselves as who we are and not who we might wish to be. It requires honest self-examination, which the Baha’i teachings advise us to implement on a daily basis:

Bring thyself to account each day ere thou art summoned to a reckoning; for death, unheralded, shall come upon thee and thou shalt be called to give account for thy deeds. – Baha’u’llah, *The Hidden Words*, p. 11.

An added benefit of self-knowledge is the spiritual growth and depth of understanding that comes with that ongoing process:

O, My servants! Could ye apprehend with what wonders of My munificence and bounty I have willed to entrust your souls, ye would, of a truth, rid yourselves of attachment to all created things, and would gain a true knowledge of your own selves—a knowledge which is the same as the comprehension of Mine own Being. – Baha’u’llah, *Gleanings from the Writings of Baha’u’llah*, pp. 326-327.

2. Meditation

Research has proven that meditation can strengthen the powers of your higher nature to deal with the challenges of life—and no challenge is bigger than the insistent self residing within:

As long as man is a captive of habit, pursuing the dictates of self and desire, he is vanquished and defeated. This passionate personal ego takes the reins from his hands, crowds out the qualities of the divine ego and changes him into an animal, a creature unable to judge good from evil, or to distinguish light from darkness. He becomes blind to divine attributes ... – Abdu’l-Baha, *Divine Philosophy*, p. 133.

We have to deal with our insistent self or ego; otherwise, it can undo any success or progress. Once we recognize it as a serious threat to our good efforts—that our lives and our efforts in this world and our progress in the next world depend on the decisions we make—we will recognize the necessity to be vigilant.

The Baha'i teachings say we make our own heaven and hell here on Earth as a result of the choices we make:

Think ye of love and good fellowship as the delights of heaven, think ye of hostility and hatred as the torments of hell. – Abdu'l-Baha, *Selections from the Writings of Abdu'l-Baha*, p. 245.

If we don't make the right decisions, and give our higher nature the upper hand, we can easily fall victim to our lower nature. So we need to tune ourselves spiritually to make the right choices, and receive the rewards and benefits of those choices. When we read the spiritual writings and meditate on their meaning, our souls are uplifted, and that affects our decision making. Our souls are tuned by reading, praying and meditating, and bringing ourselves to account each day. This important matter has great consequences in our lives, and we need to take the opportunity to adequately deal with it so that our lifelong achievements are not left to our egos.