Ten Levels of Myself: Part 1

The internal mechanics of the human mind are as complex as anything in the universe, and there are many different layers that make each of us. Science has been investigating the mind for centuries, yet so much is not understood. One of the things that has eluded scientific explanation is consciousness—what it is, where it is, how it came to be.

The incredible complexity of individual consciousness defies mechanistic explanations; each is different, with layer upon layer of feelings, thoughts, wishes, memories, dreams, desires, fantasies, motivations. The chakra system developed in India is one way to think about this complexity, but many others have been developed through the centuries, including ancient ones within Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, Confucianism, and Jewish thought. More recent models come from Jungian psychology, the enneagram, the Gurdjieff work, and Roberto Assagioli's image of how the psyche works. All are valuable, and no single model is "best."

One central question all these systems wrestle with is that of identity: "Who am I?" Each of us has numerous possibilities for how we will choose to think about who we are. And because our sense of identity shifts from moment to moment—and can change radically over a lifetime—a crucial question we each continually face is: What definition of who I am will I organize around now?

If you start to pay attention, you notice that shifts in identity usually happen at the unconscious level. But they can be made more conscious, and by doing this you will discover that growth and transformation are about developing the ability to consciously shift your identity from a smaller to a larger self, from an ego-centered outlook to an understanding that includes more, ultimately much more.

Working with identity, however, is difficult, partly because there are so many different ways I can think about who I am. One image I have found valuable is of a river into which many streams flow. Some streams come up from underground to join the river, others flow in from the surface. Rain and snow fall from overhead. In this river there are rapids and calm pools. Storms come and go, adding water to the river and sometimes agitating its surface. In this image, "I" am floating down the river of life, buffeted by every change of current. The whole river is the flow of existence, and in that flow, the little "me" floating along is trying to put together a coherent life. Occasionally, however, I have a sense that the river is also me, but this feeling is fleeting, and I don't really understand what it means. Even more rarely, I sometimes have a sense that surrounding everything, interpenetrating it all, existing as All, is the Numinous, the Infinite. But words fail here.

For each of us, when we are young, the "small me" is mostly carried along by currents from the world around us as we try to fulfill the urges and desires that are constantly rising up from within (for food, safety, comfort, sex, power, and more). The main task of life, when we are young, is trying to balance influences from the culture over against the urges and desires coming up from within. According to a number of wisdom figures through the ages, the best way to do this is to make all the conflicting currents as conscious as possible in order to make good choices about how to spend one's time and energy. If we do this reasonably well, we create a somewhat coherent ego self that has agency in the world.

The more we understand ourselves—the currents inside as well as the forces pushing and pulling from outside—the better we will be at making healthy choices and implementing them in the world. As we are able to do this with increasing skill, the better we are at steering our little ship toward a destination that seems truly valuable and important, rather than being carried this way and that by every passing current. The opposite is also the case: If we remain unconscious about the forces pushing and pulling from within and without, the more we are simply flotsam and jetsam bobbing along on the surface of the river of life without meaning or direction.

A Model: 10 Levels

When I was growing up, I came to understand myself through a model that was passed along from my culture by the people around me. It has been hard to disentangle from those views, often very difficult. Yet it has been exhilarating as well, as I accepted the challenge of separating my understanding of who I was from the early enculturation I was given. The result is a mixture of wisdom from my early years, letting go of misunderstandings and prejudices, and working to include wisdom from other cultures and traditions.

You will find below my current understanding of the levels of myself, developed over a lifetime. This model grows out of and borrows from many sources, but owes a special debt to the chakra tradition and to Carl Jung's ideas. Interestingly, these two models seldom conflict—they just approach understanding who we are in different ways. In the model below there are 10 different levels of who I am. Thinking about myself in this way has helped me arrive at a deeper understanding and a more conscious life. May it do the same for you.

1. The undifferentiated self: A small child's identity is not separate from the mother or from immediate caregivers; rather, it is merged and mingled with them, as well as with objects in the surrounding world. As we grow, however, a separate identity develops, but the young undifferentiated identity does not disappear—it is

simply overlayed with self-images and identities that gradually push it into the background, into the unconscious. Since it is still present in the unconscious, however, the undifferentiated identity will reemerge in times of stress, group hysteria, or when the overlaid identities loosen for any reason (sleep deprivation, physical exhaustion, euphoria, mystical experiences, drug-induced moments, or mental illness).

Our first identity has its primary focus in the body, along with all the urges and desires centered there—first for food, comfort, safety, and security and then for sex and other pleasures (all these make up what Freud called the *id* drives). In our earliest years, therefore, you and I (along with everyone else) experienced these drives and desires as the center of who we were and what life was about.

2. The communal self: In many cultures, societal members are taught that the self should be identified with the group rather than with a separate individuality. Most ancient cultures placed greater emphasis on communal identity than does the modern world—and this is both a blessing and a curse. Each culture is different, and there have always been differences between how cultures molded the identities of their members, with some putting more emphasis on individuality, some on group identity. Those differences in emphasis remain today. Reporting on a study, Sharon Begley noted in Newsweek that when someone raised in a Chinese culture had the thought "mother," the sense of "me" was activated, but not when a typical American thought about "mother."[1]

These differences are not all-or-nothing propositions, of course. At any given moment, each of us is somewhere on a sliding scale between oneness with a group and a feeling of individuality. Even in individualistic cultures, some people are more identified with the group than others, and in communal cultures, some lean more toward individualism than others (stories of members who were fiercely individualistic come down to us from the most communal cultures).

If, therefore, you were enculturated into a group identity, some individualism will inevitably find a way to manifest itself, for there is an urge toward individual fulfillment in everyone. If that urge is not given sufficient attention, it will burst forth in unconscious ways. For instance, those raised to identify with an extended family will act selflessly part of the time, but the individualistic urge, chafing at the bit, will push through at times and try to control the actions of others in the family "for their own good." This is individuality asserting its power under the guise of group concern.

To add to the complexity of this picture, throughout our lives most of us will shift, sometimes toward greater individualism, then back toward increased communal identity, then back again to individualism. Freudian psychology deals extensively with

these issues, and he defined the *superego* as the part of us that is enculturated to follow the rules of society. It is the internal voice that tells us to follow the rules of the group. Thus, when you are identified with this part of yourself, you think of yourself as the one who does what you are "supposed to do"—as the group understands it.

3. Personas: As we grow up, in order to fulfill the obligations we have been assigned, we each develop several roles we play within our culture, the faces we put on in day-to-day dealings with the people in our lives, roles such as rebel, good friend, athlete, life of the party, the adventurous one, the nerd, the outcast, beautiful person, the trend-setter, and on and on. As we get older, we continue developing personas, such as doctor, caregiver, housewife, teacher, sexual explorer, businessperson, and on and on. In our early years, we don't consciously choose these roles; rather, the people in our lives tend to define them for us and we develop them with the encouragement of others (or sometimes in rebellion against the roles the people around us are trying to force on us). Most importantly, in our early years we think these roles constitute who we are.

Developing personas is not a bad thing; in fact, it is valuable and necessary. In Carl Jung's view (who coined the modern usage of the term *persona*) they are crucial for many life situations. In the world, we all take on a role (boss, devoted employee, considerate relative, interested member of a group), developing a persona as a vehicle to create and maintain relationships. These roles are very useful. But some people spend their lives identifying with their personas, thinking these roles constitute all of who they are. (Think of a stern drill sergeant who carries that role home to his wife and kids, or a beauty queen who is always playing that role in all situations.) The difficulties of some famous people—several actors and politicians spring to mind—arise from the fact that they believe their personas constitute the totality of their identities.

There is, however, much more to each of us than our personas, and if we mature, we will gradually realize that the roles we play are not our full selves.

4. The complexes: Each of us has many different moods we can be in at different times, different emotional states or moods that come and go. Most of us can be angry, fearful, playful, guilty, jealous, remorseful, insecure, confident, sad, and on and on. The thing we don't usually notice is that we act and think quite differently when we are in each of these different states. Jung called these different internal points of view our *complexes,* and noted that each different complex sees the world and ourselves in a different way, sometimes *very* different.

As we move through life, we switch into one complex and then another, seeing ourselves and the world differently in each. For a taste of this, just remember a time

when someone was late and you started becoming upset, feeling angry; perhaps you felt the other person did not value you. Suddenly, you receive a phone call and learn that person was in a car accident, and you move very rapidly into fear, or caretaking, or sadness. This switch can occur in an instant. So, which complex was the "real" you?

Different situations bring out our different moods, different complexes. Most of us organize around one of our complexes when at work, another during a romantic evening, and still others when playing sports, visiting parents, caring for children, traveling, or at a party. And to emphasize again, the way we think about ourselves and the world is different in each one. Think of the difference in how you feel about yourself when you are in a confident mood versus when you are feeling fearful; when you have just lost a contest, versus having won; when an invitation you extended is accepted versus rejected. Think of how other people seem different to you when you are angry versus when you are remorseful.

The way most of us go through life is that some outside event triggers one of our moods, and *we believe for a moment that this is who we really are.* (It is amazing how easy it is to identify with one current and then another, without remembering that just a few minutes before we saw ourselves differently.) Then, something else happens and we switch feeling states and the way we see the world changes. Most of us switch often, identified with first one and then another of our complexes. The more conscious we become, however, the more we will be able to recognize the different complexes and thus be able to choose the one that is appropriate for the current situation.

There is great freedom in being able to make such choices. It allows us to use our different moods wisely—which is much better than being taken over by one after another. Imagine what it would be like if you could instantly recognize when you were being pulled into your angry self, or guilty self, or insecure self—and could choose how much energy and attention to give each state rather than being taken over by one after another. Better still, what if you were able to use the energies of your various complexes intentionally by consciously choosing which one to be in. What if you learned to consciously combine several at once?

Complexes and personas overlap, but they are somewhat different. In broad terms, when in a complex, most of us identify so fully with that specific feeling or mood state that we lose any sense of separation from it—we think that is who we really are. On the other hand, when using a persona, with a little maturity we usually recognize that it is not our full identity; we remember that we are playing a role with others, and they do not know all of who we are.

In this model I am building, the ego is everything we know and understand about ourselves. Thus, when we are caught up in a complex, in that moment that particular complex is who we think we are, so that complex has become the complete ego self. Think of a time you were so caught up in anger, or sexual desire, or fear that you forgot every other perspective. In such moments, there was no separation between your angry self, your sexual self, or your fearful self, and who you thought you were. You saw everything and everyone through the lens of that one current.

These are the moments in life you are likely to make the most serious mistakes. These are the times, when, a few minutes later, you are saying: "How could I have done that?" "How could I have said that?" The ability to raise such questions indicates you have moved back into a perspective that includes more than your anger, fear, or sexual desire. You now see that there are other points of view from which you could have chosen differently.

In this model, growth and development involve the ego becoming more and more aware of the various complexes within and strengthening the ego so that it cannot be pushed aside by any of your feeling or mood states. As your ego develops the strength and ability to make choices between the different currents within, sometimes you will choose to act from the energy of a complex, and sometimes not. As you become more conscious, the ego learns to stay present as the different complexes come and go, and you are able to make increasingly healthy choices that lead toward a balanced and coherent life.

To get a feel for this, every now and then stop and ask yourself which complex you are feeling most strongly at the moment. Are you angry, sad, confident, peaceful, or some other state? Consciously register to yourself the state you are in. Now ask: "Shall I try to shift my energy to a different state, a different mood, or shall I let this one remain the center of attention for now?" In this way, the ego can begin to play a more active role in managing your life, and you will begin to live from a broader perspective. This is the path to a healthy ego state. But first, it is important to recognize that we can have an unhealthy ego.

5. An unhealthy ego: This one little word, ***ego,*** has created an enormous amount of mischief. The word Freud used in German meant "I," but it was given a fancy-sounding Latin name when translated into English, thus the simple pronoun "I" became the mysterious ***ego***. The motives of the translator are unclear, but the translator's audacity in changing Freud's intent has given rise to great confusion and endless arguments.

There are many definitions for *ego* in the English language today, so let me give the one I prefer, which is also the one used by most mainstream psychologists: The ego is simply who I think I am as I go about living my life. It includes everything that comes to mind when I think of myself. In short, my ego is "me." It is the "me" I think of as myself, my individual self, including all the thoughts, emotions, desires, values, responsibilities, abilities, body images, and memories of which I am conscious. ("Of which I am conscious"—that is the key phrase in defining ego.) My ego is simply my sense of who I think I am.

The ego can be healthy or unhealthy. Some people remain fairly undifferentiated, failing to develop much of an ego, thus remaining fused with other people and the world around them. They do not develop a clear sense of a separate self. Others develop an insecure ego, and still others a narcissistic one. For a narcissistic ego there is little or no concern for the needs and desires of others. It feels it is, and should be, the center of the universe, and that other people are objects to fulfill its desires.

Those who are wholly identified with the narcissistic ego (and most of us are somewhat identified this way at times), feel that the world should be organized for our personal enjoyment and fulfillment. The overwhelming sense is that everyone is out to get what they can for themselves, and everyone is in competition with every other person for the good things in life. For those organized in this place, the only restraints to action—if there are any—is fear of being punished, condemned, or blamed. Thus the need for rules and laws in all societies.

Make no mistake, however, extreme narcissists can be quite successful in the world. Skilled narcissists learn to manipulate others to get what they want, and can become very clever at seeming to follow the rules of society while surreptitiously breaking them. Some narcissists are good at getting others to focus on their wishes and desires (just notice how some celebrities are treated). Ironically, the narcissistic ego needs attention precisely because it is weak. It is always seeking more recognition, more praise, always wanting more of what it believes it needs. Trouble is, no matter how much it receives, it is never enough. Thus, the path to healing narcissism is for a person to get beyond their narcissistic wounds so they can feel truly good about themselves deep inside.

The difference between a healthy ego and a narcissistic one is that a healthy ego does not exclusively focus on itself but recognizes that others also have needs and desires and thus makes an effort to recognize the feelings and needs of others. A healthy ego recognizes that a big part of life involves being in good relationships with others and sees that it must take the feelings and needs of others into account. It therefore values mutuality and exchange. So, let us move to what a healthy ego looks like.

6. A healthy ego: Early consciousness of our inner self is primarily an awareness of urges, needs, and desires. These develop from our first years and on into puberty. These impulses can be quite strong and much of early life is organized around coping with them—fulfilling them when possible, learning to control them as best we are able when we realize doing so is not a healthy path to follow. As consciousness continues to develop, we begin to sense that the roles we play are not who we really are, that beneath the surface is more than just the roles. We begin to develop an observing self that recognizes that our personas are simply roles we play when interacting with others. We are now becoming more mature by developing a conscious ego self.

For example, you might behave in a friendly way toward someone at work but inside you realize you are seething with anger at that same person. In this situation, the ego knows you are angry, while the persona is the mask you are wearing as you act pleasant. The "you" that knows you are angry is ego awareness. Another example would be acting stern with a child to make a point, while inside you are feeling tenderness toward that same child.

With the emergence of ego awareness, the ego takes on the job of fulfilling our needs and desires. Using Freud's terms, these urges and desires are our *id* energies, and the *superego* the part of us that has incorporated societal rules and tries to get us to obey them. These superego rules are the boundaries for our actions in relation to other people, the guardrails we feel we must stay within as we pursue our wants and needs. The *ego* mediates between the id and the superego as it tries to fulfill as many of our wants and desires as possible.

At this stage of development, then, your ego manages your life. It tries to balance all the internal currents and conflicts in relation to outer pressures and demands. To do this, it makes decisions and develops a course of action, while trying to get the id desires, the complexes, and the superego to go along with the unified plan. It operates by thinking things through and coming to conclusions about how it will use your time and energy: what it will commit to, the things it will decline, where it will place its attention, and the things it will try to turn your attention away from because they are not helpful for movement toward the overall goals.

When you reach this level of development, you recognize there are a lot of things you know about yourself that you are not sharing with others, with the result that people do not really know you. Therefore, to develop mental health, it is vital to find a few people with whom you can share yourself more fully. This is a step toward a healthy ego, and if you don't take it, you will never have true friends or loved ones and you will never receive honest feedback to use for growth.

As you are able to distinguish between your ego and your personas, and then become conscious of all the moods that sometimes take over your awareness, you are gradually able to drop a persona when it is no longer appropriate in a given situation (being stuck in the wrong persona is always a problem). And you are able to use the energy of a complex when it fits the situation, then put it aside when it does not. Your ego awareness becomes the manager of your life, bringing your personas and complexes into a well-functioning team. This is not easy, of course; it requires a lot of work to reach this level of self-awareness.

Anyone who has tried to understand this process has discovered how amazingly complicated it is, as evidenced by the countless volumes that have been written trying to define and describe the internal mental system of a human being. To catch a glimpse of how mysterious and difficult understanding all this is, ask yourself: Where is my ego? How do I decide on what I will do and what I won't do? Do I see the part of me that is formulating a plan of action? Do I always go along with the plan? If not, what part of me wants to go in a different direction?

These questions go on and on: When I wish for conflicting things—to eat a lot of sweet food but not gain weight, to watch a movie but also get some sleep, to attend two different events that are happening at the same time, to go on a date but also finish a project—how do I decide? How do I know when my ego is making decisions, versus an id urge, a complex, or the superego?

When I try to work through these questions, I realize that no part of this system can be seen clearly. It is all ephemeral, made up of vague concepts. Still, I have an intuitive sense that there is a part of me that is trying to organize my life, trying to fulfill as many goals and ambitions as possible in terms of career, relationships, health, adventure, romance, learning, and having fun. Amidst all these currents, there is some part of me that is trying to balance them all while also trying to manage my fears, anxieties, commitments and aversions—trying to navigate all the competing interests in my life as best it can. To me, that is my ego, but trying to get a handle on it intellectually is like trying to see an electron—I can only see the traces of its actions after they have occurred.

It is, of course, quite possible to use a different word to describe this part of ourselves. But it is not possible to live without some part of oneself fulfilling this function, prior to complete enlightenment or becoming totally merged with the Infinite. Thus, you have a functioning ego, whatever name you give it. What I recommend—since we seem to be stuck with it through broad usage—is that we all use *ego* in the way Freud, Jung, and many modern psychologists understand it.

This means, for me, that when I seek success, power, fame, prestige, or personal wealth, the pursuit is organized by my ego. These are some of life's main motivations, and my ego has tried to balance and fulfill these goals much of my life. But also, when I try to be a good person, participate in a healthy relationship, help other people, or improve the world, these pursuits are also organized by my ego. In fact, when I pursue anything, it is my ego that organizes my life to be able to move in that direction. Even the desire for enlightenment, liberation, or to go to heaven is organized by the ego—which is the reason the Buddha said we must have the one "Great Desire" and Christians speak of "Holy Longing." In short, the best word I know for the part of ourselves that tries to organize a life, balancing all the disparate currents, is the ego.

Of utmost importance, then, in this model the ego is not bad; in fact, it is a totally necessary part of being human. I sometimes smile inside when someone says they want "to get rid of the ego," because the only part of us that would have that thought is the ego. Just think about what that phrase actually means: "I want to get rid of *I*." This is altogether different from asking: "Who am I?"

A few saints and sages have stepped into a field where there was no longer an ego present, but I have never read about any who did this by focusing on getting rid of the ego. Or talking about wanting to. It always grew out a profound moment that happened in a way that no one knows how to plan for—or make happen. I don't think it was ever the ego that made such a thing happen. Thus, when a person says they want to get rid of the ego, it suggests an ego that thinks it will seem special to itself or others if it says it wants to get rid of itself.

In this model, the goal is to work toward developing a healthy ego instead of an unhealthy one, an ego that recognizes that other people are valuable and worthwhile. Then, as that work proceeds, it is learning to direct the ego toward goals that reflect higher possibilities and finding ways to open one's identity to dimensions that are larger than the ego.

Once I have made sufficient progress on those steps, I might be ready to undertake the difficult work of beginning to let go of everything that keeps me from becoming my full self, and moving to the four higher levels described in the next chapter.

[1] Sharon Begley, "How Different Cultures Shape the Brain," *Newsweek Magazine*, February 18, 2010.