

# Outgrowing Ego

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When I was a child I had a stuffed bear named Goldie. In my pre-school days I would carry her around the house with me and hold her when I went to sleep every night. As I got a bit older I could be rough with her—I might toss her around and pretend to wrestle and fight with her—but I still needed her when I went to bed.

One day when I was maybe in first or second grade, I came home from school with some neighborhood boys and took Goldie outside to play with. We punched her to see how far we could each make her go, threw her around like a football, and in general roughhoused with her. Shortly after that I came home from school and Goldie was gone. After searching for her in a panic, I went to my mother for help and she said, “I saw you throwing her around with your friends so I decided it was time to give her away to the Goodwill.”

Even though I was starting to outgrow my need for Goldie, this was devastating to me. I am sure I must have turned for comfort to something else—another toy, maybe a book I liked, or a favorite item of clothing; I still needed something familiar to give me a sense of security. Eventually when I got older I began to rely on what the vast majority of us rely on: ego. Ego is what most adults cling to for comfort and security, just like I clung to Goldie when I was a child.

Actually, ego is not a “thing” at all, but a process in the mind which creates a sense of identity. It is a self-sense constructed of various perceptions related to our body, our emotions and our mind—feelings, thoughts, and images regarding who we are. Yet we relate to this process as though it was our best friend and closest companion, just like I related to Goldie—a construction of cloth, molded plastic, and fake fur—as though she was my best friend. I loved Goldie and I knew that Goldie loved me, yet of course that was all an illusion.

Our mind loves to ego, to construct a sense of who we are from the psychological material at hand, and we then hold this sense close to us for comfort and security. If someone should attack our sense of self when we are still in love with it, we would lash out just like a child lashes out when another child tries to take their favorite toy from them—with anger or tears, or maybe both.

But eventually, some people start to outgrow ego. They feel constricted by it and begin to recognize this love affair with ego is holding back further development. Because they aren't really ready yet to let go of ego, they bat it around for a while with such “spiritual” ideas as “my ego is getting in the way of my growth,” or “I keep trying to get rid of my ego but it keeps coming back.” They have an ambivalent relationship where they don't want to cling to it, yet can't fully let go of it. They wrestle and roughhouse with it instead.

But of course if ego was suddenly ripped away, they would be terrified! No familiar sense of self to hold on to for comfort and security? I wasn't really asking for that! Find me

something else to cling to—concoct a new sense of self that I can claim as my own. Often this new, improved self is a “spiritual” self, a self that sees itself as someone on the path to transcending the self!

This is all fine, but in the end neither fighting with ego nor getting rid of it is the solution, just as wrestling with Goldie or giving her to the Goodwill did not end my need for something to cling to. The problem was not in Goldie, it was in my way of relating to Goldie. To me she was still Goldie, and I still had feelings about her. At times I wanted her, and at other times I wanted not to want her, but she was still an important presence in my life.

I could not have known then the way I know now that Goldie was a construction of cloth, molded plastic, and fake fur, without the slightest shred of the independent beingness that I attributed to her. Once you become an adult and see that, there is no going back. If I were to discover Goldie today, hidden away in a trunk at my parents’ home, I could not possibly relate to her as I did as a child. Perhaps I could call upon the memory of my relationship with her, and enjoy for a moment the affection I had for her, but the ability to relate to her as I did when a child would not really be possible.

And so it is with ego. You do not have to fight or get rid of ego, only take a close look at it. This is the point of meditation and mindfulness practice, to examine carefully and see clearly the components of the mind process of ego. Sooner or later you will be able to pull back from your love/hate relationship with ego and see that it is no more real than a stuffed bear, and at that moment your relationship with ego will start to change. The old attachments and aversions to ego will dissolve, until you are left with only a nostalgic memory of how it used to be.

Ego will sit on a shelf in your bedroom and you may regard her with wry fondness from time to time, but you will not really want to go back to being a child.