

Self, Soul and Mind

When studying the topics of mindfulness and meditation, it quickly becomes apparent that the concept of the SELF figures prominently in the specialized literature and is often used in different contexts. But what does “the Self” mean?

In general, a distinction is made between two levels of the SELF:¹

- The LOWER SELF: The I, the person, our so-called ego, that which separates us from the HIGHER SELF. It concerns identification with our body, with our fluctuating feelings and thoughts, i.e. with what we call our personality.
- The HIGHER SELF: In the teachings on mindfulness and meditation, this term refers to a higher level that goes beyond the I construct of personality. This higher Self concerns the inner core of the human being, also known as the SOUL.

In this section, in addition to the two levels and meanings of the SELF, the term EGO will also be examined, since the limitations of the human mind produced by the EGO obscure the path to the HIGHER SELF.

Self and Personality – the Lower Self

Especially in the spiritual tradition of India it is postulated that man is essentially the Self (soul) and therefore divine. But this divinity is neither recognized nor lived, because the majority of the human spirit is directed outwards and is bound in the material. Swami Muktananda (1908-1982), one of the great Indian spiritual teachers of our time, says in his book *Where Are You Going? A Guide to the Spiritual Journey*: “There is one great obstacle that keeps us from knowing the Self, and that is the mind. The mind veils the inner Self and hides it from us.”²

If we follow a traditional meditation technique, provided that the mind is healthy, the higher Self can be experienced. Swami Muktananda describes this as follows: “That is why the ancient sages, who were true psychologists, concluded that the mind is the source of both bond-

The essential feature of consciousness of the Self is therefore continuity, permanence. But that of the conscious I is only a pale reflection of the eternal, immortal essence of the spiritual I, the Self.

Roberto Assagioli (1888-1974)

age and liberation, the source of both sorrow and joy, our worst enemy as well as our greatest friend.”³

In psychology, the “science of the soul”⁴, there are many terms used in connection with the word self, such as SELF CONCEPT or SELF IMAGE. In many branches of psychology, these terms refer to concrete ideas that people have about themselves and therefore closely relate to the personality.

To what extent we are satisfied with our self-image depends on the ideal or desired image we have of ourselves. Who do I want to be? What do I want to achieve in life? The decisive point here is that this understanding of the personal self is usually linked to external objects and forms of behavior and has nothing to do with the Higher Self or the soul.

Higher Self and Soul

There are, however, schools of thought in psychology that have already adopted a transcendent level of the Self and firmly integrated it into their theories.⁵ Thus, the Swiss psychiatrist and founder of analytical psychology, Carl Gustav Jung (1875-1961), spoke of the Self as an inner center: “I have called this center the Self, the center of personality; it could just as well be called the God in us. The beginnings of our entire spiritual life seem to spring inextricably from this point. And all the highest and ultimate goals seem to run toward it.”⁶

Another example is Psychosynthesis, founded by the Italian physician, psychiatrist and psychotherapist Roberto Assagioli (1888-1974).⁷ “Psychosynthesis is not only therapy, it is a philosophy of life, a psychology for the individual who wants to grow. It is a method for harmonizing all psychic functions, reintegrating the unconscious and creating a center of harmony so that it becomes the higher Self: the soul that is expressed, witnessed, lived, manifested.”⁸

Instead of a higher Self, Assagioli also spoke of the transpersonal or spiritual Self.⁹ This transpersonal Self gives “permanence” and “stability” in contrast to the personal, conscious I, which, according to Assagioli, is only a “weakened and veiled form” of the transpersonal Self.¹⁰

In his book *Be As You Are. The Teachings of Sri Ramana Maharshi* the well-known Indian spiritual teacher Ramana Maharshi (1879-1950) discusses the “Self” and the “I”: “The real Self is the infinite ‘I’. That ‘I’ is perfection. It is eternal. It has no origin and no end. The other ‘I’ is born and also dies. It is impermanent.”¹¹ According to Maharshi, attachments to the “other I” cause us to lose the infinite “I” as an alignment point: “After the rise of the ‘I’-thought there is the false identification of the ‘I’ with the body, the senses, the mind, etc. ‘I’ is wrongly associated with them and the true ‘I’ is lost sight of. In order to sift the pure ‘I’ from the contaminated ‘I’, this discarding is mentioned. But it does not mean exactly discarding of the non-Self, it means the finding of the real Self.”¹²

For him, the question “Who am I?” is here the central point. To pursue this question sincerely leads to the suspension of identification with one’s own sensory impressions, emotions and thoughts and ultimately to deep awareness, to the pure I, to the Self.¹³

Beyond the Higher Self and the Soul – the Divine Self

In the Indian tradition, the term “Atman” is used for the terms “higher self” or “soul”.¹⁴ When asked what Atman, the soul, is, the Indian spiritual teacher Mother Meera answers: “The atman comes from the Paramatman. Just as the atman is essential for the body so is Paramatman important for the atman.”¹⁵

Mother Meera sees Paramatman, as “the greatest” and “the origin, the essence of the entire universe. There is no place without it but it has no name or form.”¹⁶

Also the spiritual teacher Sri Chinmoy (1931-2007), who from 1970 until the end of his life conducted peace meditations twice a week for delegates and employees at the UN headquarters in New York, sees the soul as the link to the Supreme: “The Inner Pilot is our Lord Supreme, and the soul is the representative of the Inner Pilot, of our Lord Beloved Supreme. [...] The way the soul is the representative of God, even so, the body, vital, mind and heart are also supposed to be the representatives of the soul.”¹⁷

*The soul acts as a protector
during our lives,
and is always with us.
It has no wishes of its own.
It is not only a witness
or guide but also helps
our development.
Free from the influence
of our actions,
it remains permanently
with us through our lives
until we unite with the Divine.*

Mother Meera

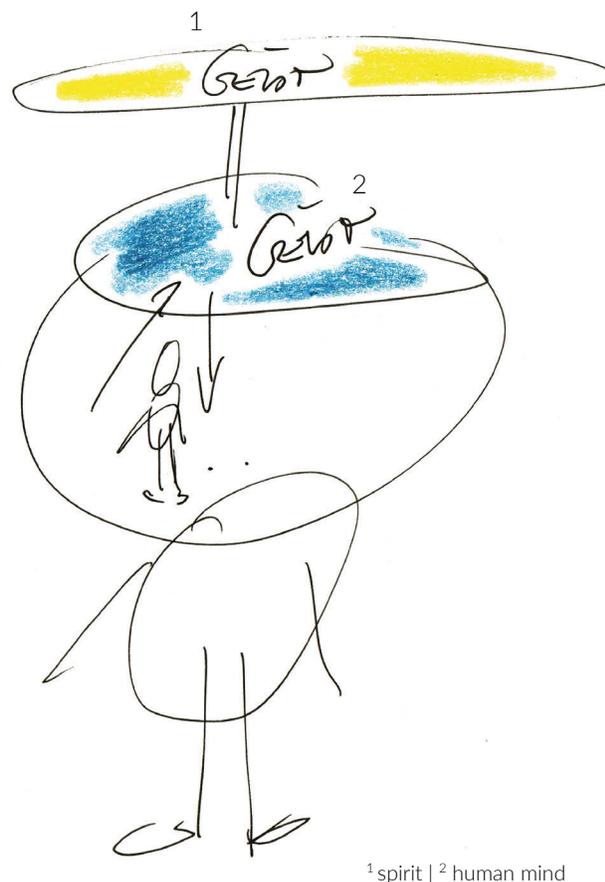
The Ego

The reason that these representatives quoted above cannot act as instruments of the soul is the existence of the ego. “The ego is that very thing which limits us in every sphere of life. [...] The ordinary human ego gives us the sense of separate identity, separate consciousness. No doubt, the sense of individuality, of self-importance, is necessary at a certain stage in man’s development. But the ego separates our individual consciousness from the universal consciousness.”¹⁸

In the book *Courage and Contentment* by Indian spiritual teacher Swami Chidvilasananda, the ego is defined as “limited sense of ‘I’ that is identified with the body, mind, and senses; sometimes described as ‘the veil of suffering.’”¹⁹

For the Indian spiritual teacher and peace activist Vishnu Devananda (1927-1993), identification with the ego causes suffering and also prevents alignment with the higher Self: “The cause of this predicament is the *ahamkara*, or ego. [...] This *ahamkara* is the cause of all bondage and is the chief barrier to the experience of inner Reality.”²⁰

In order to free oneself from the clutches of the ego, according to Mother Meera the gaze must be shifted to the Divine: “Every human being has an ego. It is better not to give so much importance to the ego or to name and fame. Try to know that Paramatman is the greatest, then there is no ego.”²¹



Divine spirit and the human mind

If people learn to align themselves with the Divine and strengthen their connection to the higher Self or the soul, they become less susceptible to influences and role models that reinforce the ego or the I-related self-concept and self-image. Then this divine alignment ultimately leads to inner harmony and contentment.²²

From only the few sources mentioned in the text above it is already evident that many terms for the self exist in the various scriptures. In the following – for a better understanding and a clearer overview – the different designations mentioned are classified according to their meaning into the two levels of the Self described earlier in this section:

- The LOWER SELF: Non-Self, Ego²³, I, contaminated I, other I, conscious I, personal I, personality
- The HIGHER SELF: Self, inner Self, real Self, spiritual Self, transpersonal Self, atman, soul, infinite I, pure I, spiritual I, true I

Mind and Spirit

As mentioned at the beginning of this section, the mind can be both a friend and an enemy.²⁴ Its role is determined by that with which the mind is aligned (see also section “Intellect and Intuition”, p. 39). To the question “What is the difference between the mind and the Self?” Ramana Maharshi answers: “There is no difference. The mind turned inwards is the Self; turned outwards, it becomes the ego and all the world. [...] But the mind does not exist apart from the Self, that is, it has no independent existence. The Self exists without the mind, never the mind without the Self.”²⁵ The inward direction builds the connection to the Self, to the soul. Directed outward, the mind relates to our psyche – this means to our cognitive faculties, which also relates to our feelings and emotions.

In addition to mind, the term spirit must also be considered in a differentiated way.²⁶ Spirit can refer to a person’s charisma, but can also refer to the ABSOLUTE, the DIVINE. This particular aspect, the “Divine Spirit”, plays an especially important role in meditation. Assagioli describes this level as follows: “The Spirit in itself is the highest reality, in its transcendent, that is, absolute aspect, free from any limitation and concrete determination. The Spirit transcends all the limits of time and space, breaks all material fetters. In its essence it is eternal, infinite, free

and universal. This highest, absolute reality cannot be intellectually grasped, for it is beyond the human mind; but it can be rationally postulated, intuitively grasped, and to some extent mystically experienced.”²⁷

In order for this divine spirit to manifest as pure consciousness, as a spark of God, in the physical world, in matter, an intermediary is needed: the higher Self or soul, which then in turn acts on the personality and its carriers, the mind, the emotions and the body.

These carriers, however, are for a long time only oriented to the physical world via the senses, which results in a life that is – as mentioned in the text section Ego – identity-related and led in limitation.

The true goal of the soul, however, is to dissolve the limitation of the personality vehicles and to raise them to its level, so that ultimately the “highest Truth”²⁸ can be realized in the physical world.²⁹

Mother Meera describes this as follows: “The atman guides our development and is the basis or root cause of all our physical and subtle bodies. It works through all the various bodies to experience everything and then will take all this experience back to Paramatman in realization.”³⁰

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- ⁵ Cf. Piron 2020, p. 9 ff.; see for example Assagioli 2010 and 2012.
- ⁶ Fürst 1985, p. 100 [Author's translation].
- ⁷ For a detailed description of the life and work of Roberto Assagioli see Giovetti 2007.
- ⁸ Giovetti 2007, p. 110 [Author's translation].
- ⁹ Assagioli preferred the term “transpersonal” instead of “spiritual” as he considered it more neutral and scientific (see Giovetti 2007, p. 182).
- ¹⁰ Assagioli 2008, p. 31 [Author's translation]; see also Assagioli 2010, S. 10 f. as well as Assagioli 2012, S. 15 f.
- ¹¹ Maharshi 2017, p. 74.
- ¹² Maharshi 2017, p. 73 f.; see also Singer 2007, p. 28 f.
- ¹³ Cf. Maharshi 2011, p. 18 f.; see also Singer 2007, p. 29 as well as Hazrat Inayat Khan 2016, p. 251 f.
- ¹⁴ Cf. Singer 2007, p. 29; see also Giovetti 2007, p. 104 f.
- ¹⁵ Mother Meera 2019, p. 125; see also Yogananda 2010, p. 68.
- ¹⁶ Mother Meera 2006, p. 14.
- ¹⁷ Sri Chinmoy 2015, p. 755. That the mind should be in service to the soul, see also Hazrat Inayat Khan 2019, p. 337.
- ¹⁸ Sri Chinmoy 1966, p. 12; according to Maharshi, this is also the moment when the ego arises: “The I-thought is the first thought of the mind. It is the ego (the individual I-feeling, Ahamkara).” Maharshi 2011a, p. 20 f.
- ¹⁹ Chidvilasananda 1999, p. 163; Maharshi sees the mind in this context as the “inner sense organ”, see Maharshi 2006, p. 13.
- ²⁰ Vishnu Devananda 1981, p. 3.
- ²¹ Mother Meera 2006, p. 30; see also Sri Chinmoy 1966, p. 13.
- ²² Cf. Sri Chinmoy 2012, p. 6; Assagioli 2010, p. 155 ff.
- ²³ In some scriptures the term ego stands for the soul. However, as a rule, the ego refers to the lower self.
- ²⁴ See quotations of Swami Muktananda on p. 25. An example of how the human mind works is given by Swami Vishnu Devananda 1981, p. 2 f.
- ²⁵ Maharshi 2017, p. 16.
- ²⁶ Cf. Assagioli 2008, p. 204.
- ²⁷ Assagioli 2008, p. 204 [Author's translation].
- ²⁸ Sri Chinmoy 1974a, p. 1.
- ²⁹ Cf. Sri Chinmoy 2015, p. 755. See also Hazrat Inayat Khan 2016, p. 301 f.
- ³⁰ Mother Meera 2019, p. 125.

Magazine

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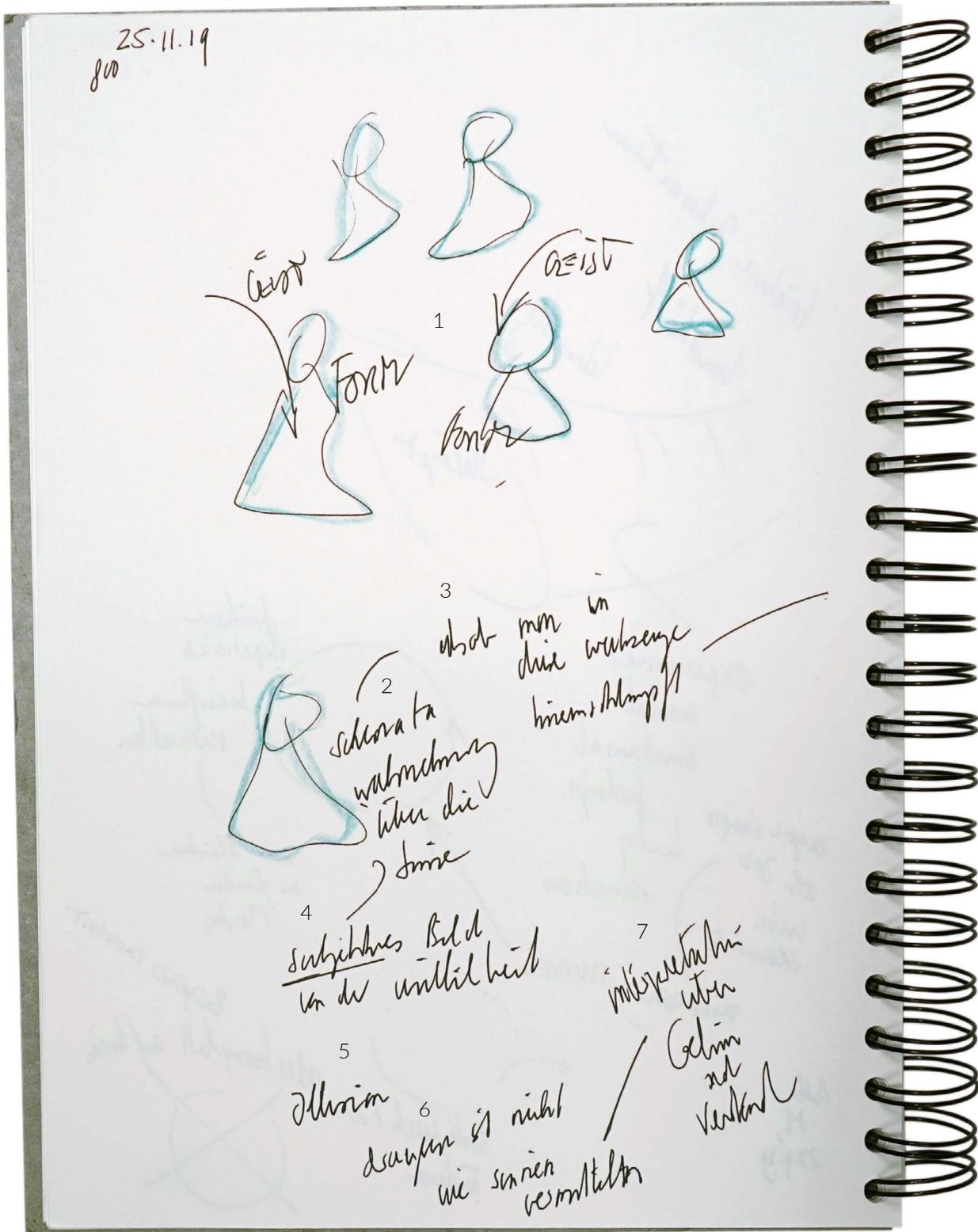
¹ In some writings a third, finer level of the self is also distinguished: the impersonal self, the monad.

² Muktananda 1989, p. 45.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Kahler / Nitsch 1994, p. 426 [Author's translation]. For a short introduction to the topic “soul” see Haug 2018, p. 10 ff. and 197 ff.

Spirit enters the form. The outer form of man is only the shell.



¹ spirit, form | ² thought patterns, perception through the senses | ³ one slips into these vehicles | ⁴ subjective image of reality | ⁵ illusion | ⁶ outside is not as the senses convey it | ⁷ interpretation via brain and mind