

## **Ego and Essence: An Exploration of the Types as a Continuum**

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In the *Enneagram Monthly* over the last year or two, I have been following the exploration of ego vs. Essence, negative / positive aspects of type, and the nature of personality / temperament / character / individuality distinctions, etc. I have found that the Riso-Hudson approach to the Enneagram, with its roots in A.H. Almaas's Diamond Approach, addresses these questions as well.

In the Riso-Hudson teachings as I understand them, there is no hard and fast duality of “positive” Essence vs. “negative” ego—we are on an ego/Essence continuum all the time; thus, holding, understanding, and working with both ego and Essence are necessary for our unfoldment and growth. As Almaas puts it, “The personality is not something that needs to die or to be thrown away; the personality needs to develop in time, to be refined, and integrated with the sense of beingness” (*Diamond Heart Book Four: Indestructible Innocence*, p. 69).

Before giving some examples of this ego/Essence continuum, I would like to define a few terms as I am using them here: **True Nature, Ego, and Levels of Development.**

By **True Nature**, I mean that innate spiritual impulse that is within all—call it the Divine, the Beloved, God, Higher Power, Allah, the Buddha, Love, Essence, etc.. Each type feels most sensitive to a particular Essential Quality of our True Nature or flavor/slice of the Divine. In the Riso-Hudson approach, the teaching is that we are working more directly with our True Nature in the Healthy Levels (Levels 1-3), and at Level 1, we are our True Nature. This understanding fits well with Susan Rhodes's recent exploration (in *The Enneagram of Individuality*, September 2008) of how type is inborn and deeper than personality. *Our type, in fact, is a facet of our True Nature* (more specific examples follow below).

**Ego/Personality.** As psychologists know, we need an ego to be able to function in the world—it is a useful and necessary structuring of our soul up until Level 1, at which point Consciousness/Awareness replaces it. Thus, our egos are not negative per se! In the Riso-Hudson work, we understand the ego, or personality, to be a structure or an imprint, which can be likened to a room. In the Healthy Levels, this room has more and more transparent walls, allowing our True Nature

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to shine through. As we move down through the Levels, the walls are getting a little more occluded and it's harder not only for our True Nature to shine through, but also for us to see it—our view is getting a little dimmer. And finally by the bottom of the Unhealthy Levels, the walls are so solid that no light can shine through at all, and we have lost contact with our True Nature. As Russ Hudson puts it, “The problem isn't that we have an ego, but that we think we are our ego.”

**Levels of Development.** This refers to the nine Levels of Development, formulated by Don Riso and further developed by Russ Hudson, that describe our capacity to be present and lay out the path for each type's development. We each have a center of gravity in the Levels, a comfortable range in which we are used to operating. At the same time, we can hop up to a higher Level and have a taste of True Nature, or something can trigger us and we can drop down momentarily to a much lower Level, but we tend to return to our center of gravity. Major crises can cause us to have a center of gravity shift downward, away from our True Nature, and moments of grace and spiritual work can create a shift up in our center of gravity, towards greater Presence.

Most of us are operating in the Average Levels (Levels 4-6), but we like to think of ourselves in the Healthy Levels. Understanding the Levels explicates how sometimes we have greater choice and flexibility (at a higher Level) and how at other times, we have little or no real choice (at a lower Level), and are truly driven by our ego needs of the moment.

At the higher Levels, we are more in touch with Essence and are integrating more parts of ourselves. This develops in us what Susan Rhodes refers to in her article as “character.” At these Levels we are living more of our “positive” qualities because we are more in touch with Essence, and thus more “real.” In the average to lower Levels, when we are more identified with ego, we become more predictable and habitual, less flexible and open, and exhibit more of what Susan refers to as our “personality.”

**Ego and Essence Type Examples.** What is the difference between ego and Essence? When we are in touch with Essence, we feel an all-encompassing sense of aliveness, connection, and well-being. This is distinctive for each type, and depends on the Essential Quality/flavor of True Nature to which they are most sensitive. Imagine how we feel when we are in contact with Essence—with our holy ground, our most exquisite sense of God-communion, this most amazing, sacred, and treasured experience of the Divine. Now imagine how it feels when

we cannot maintain that contact, but live with the only the memory of this potential, which is our birthright or True Nature.

With that in mind, we can also begin to understand how traumatic it really is to lose contact with this True Nature—a loss that happens during infancy, which Riso and Hudson refer to as “the primal catastrophe.” This loss of contact with the Essential Quality to which each type is most sensitive causes each of the nine personality types to compensate by developing nine different strategies to try to recreate this contact with our deepest, most true self.

As Almaas says, “Understanding that the ego is a reflection, or an imitation, of a true reality makes it possible to connect to this reality” (*The Pearl Beyond Price*, p.18). This understanding can illuminate how our type motivations are a mix of divine yearning and ego questing. Seen in this light, the ego motivation is driven by a deeper motivation to regain contact with that which is most truly who we are, with that which we love the most, our sacred ground. *Thus, the whole unfolding of personality has a sacred impulse at its core.*

I will give an example of how this works by looking at each of the Centers and particularly at one type from each Center: Types 8, 4, and 6. We can also think of each of these types as aspects within each of us. It is difficult to describe in a few words the depth and breadth of Being that these Essential Qualities describe, so these brief descriptions may be thought of as a jumping off place for your own exploration.

**In the Instinctive Center**, the Center that is about solidity, grounding, vitality, centeredness, the Essential Qualities for each type are:

- Type Eight—Essential Strength, Aliveness/Immediacy
- Type Nine—Essential Wholeness, Unity
- Type One—Essential Alignment, Integrity, Balance

**Type 8:** The Divine or True Nature is perceived as a sense of Essential Strength to the Eight—like aliveness, immediacy, realness, confidence, power, robustness...When feeling connected, grounded, or resonating with Essential Strength, the Eight in me feels able to be heroic, courageous, self-surrendering, magnanimous, and empowering I am one with Strength and this gives me a reason to live, a purpose, a sense of Being.

When the Eight in me feels disconnected from Essential Strength, I am driven to find a way to recreate this connection. For without a sense of Strength, I feel as if I am totally screwed! I am weak, vulnerable, dependent, in need of protection—

and these are all things that I do not want to feel. So, the Basic Desire arises “to protect myself, to be in control of my own life and destiny” (Riso-Hudson, *Core Dynamics Sheets*).

Now the ego steps in to try to take care of this problem—the ego will try to fulfill the Basic Desire, and thus the whole characteristic profile of Type Eight is born. In trying to protect myself because I feel cut off from Essential Strength,

- at the Healthy Levels, I try to be strong, direct, and decisive.
- at the Average Levels, this translates as hard-driving, no-nonsense, dominating, and intimidating.
- at the Unhealthy Levels, this becomes dictatorial, ruthless, terrorizing, and destructive.

These attitudes and behaviors that the Eight in me is manifesting are all because of the perceived loss of contact with Essential Strength. This effort is an attempt by the ego to recreate this Strength, which the ego can’t actually do. But the ego I take myself to be doesn’t know this, so I keep asserting to find what feels like a true sense of strength, to have contact with what I know to be my birthright, Essential Strength.

**In the Heart Center**, the Center that is about being vulnerable and affected, impressionable, and open to love, the Essential Qualities for each type are:

- Type Two—Essential Love
- Type Three—Essential Value
- Type Four—Essential Identity

Essential Identity is the Essential Quality to which the Four feels most sensitive. When the Four in me is in contact with this quality, I know that I am somebody—that I am a truly original human being. There is a sense of deep intimacy with myself and others, and I am able to see the incredible beauty, originality, and revelation that each person, including me, is. I am one with Essential Identity and this allows me to be engaged, self-renewing, life-embracing, and inspired.

When the Four in me feels cut off from Essential Identity, from the Divine, there arises a great fear that I am nothing, a nobody, with no significance—as Russ says, “God could look down and not even see me.” Thus, in an attempt to create a feeling-sense of Essential Identity, the Basic Desire arises: “to find myself and my personal significance” (Riso-Hudson, *Core Dynamics Sheets*).

Again, the ego is ready to try to solve this problem—if I can find things about myself that are unique, explore the breadth and depth of my personal, individual

feelings, and develop an image that stands out, maybe then I'll feel contact again. Maybe then I'll feel jazzed, aligned, and connected to my True Identity. So, as we look at the Levels of Development again, we can see how this longing manifests externally:

- at the Healthy Levels, I am introspective, sensitive, and expressive.
- at the Average Levels, I am dramatizing, romanticizing, temperamental, and self-absorbed.
- at the Unhealthy Levels, I am hateful, tormented, and despairing.

All of these behaviors are a result of trying to follow my Basic Desire in order to recreate a connection to my True Nature, my Essential Identity! I want very much to feel contact with my own divine nature, my own real identity and I know no other way to do it than to try to create it. But the ego ultimately can't do it—at best it can create an expressive approximation, and at worst, it can lead me to despair of ever being in touch with any intimate sense of identity again.

**In the Head Center**, the Center that is about Gnosis, Quiet Mind, vast spaciousness, and clarity, the Essential Qualities for each type are:

- Type Five: Essential Illumination, Understanding
- Type Six: Essential Awakeness
- Type Seven: Essential Freedom

For Type Six, contact with Essential Awakeness is a sense of knowing that I am available, alert, and awake to that which appears on my path. This Awakeness is the ground that holds everything—to be wakeful means that nothing can “go wrong” because I am awake and ready to meet life, with no need to fear being unprepared. Being awake means that I recognize that I am guided, that I can show up in the moment with whatever is needed, that I, awake, am enough. I am part of this unfolding guidance, part of this awakeness, part of this secure ground. This feels like the Divine, my True Nature. I am this, and I am enlivened by it, grounded in it, and one with it.

When it feels as if this Awakeness falls out from under me, I no longer feel safe or know what to do and where to go. So, the Basic Desire arises: “to find security and support—a trustworthy orientation” (Riso-Hudson, *Core Dynamics Sheets*).

The ego, of course, is more than happy to step in and try to work this out—so I maintain a stance of being alert, vigilant, hard-working, always trying to figure out what is safe and supportive. If there is no ground here, how can I be alert, responsible, and committed to creating something that will support me and give

me a sense of ground, of guidance? The behaviors and attitudes, again, vary depending on my psychological health:

- at the Healthy Levels, I am reliable, alert, and committed
- at the Average Levels, I am dutiful, worrying, defensive, and suspicious
- at the Unhealthy Levels, I am panicky, unreliable, and paranoid

But no matter how hard I try to recreate a sense of Awakeness and thereby feel secure, I never succeed in getting back to that amazing feeling of being Essential Awakeness. My ego cannot create this—it can only create a false imitation of the real thing. All my vigilance, all my keeping track, all my loyalty, all my questioning does not lead me back to what I hold most dear.

**In summary**, seeing the nine type manifestations in this way gives me more understanding and compassion for how we are all trying to reconnect with that which we see as most sacred and most holy—the deepest contact we can feel to our True Nature. Each type loses more and more touch with the specific Essential Quality to which they are most sensitive as they go down the Levels. Contact with the Essential Quality gets more and more occluded, and in an attempt to reconnect, the ego gets involved in creating an ersatz version of that specific Essential Quality. Unfortunately, the less healthy we are, the more distorted the attempt at recreating a connection becomes. But it is always a continuum. At any moment, we can wake up a little more and be more present, more in touch with Essence, or fall asleep a little more and lose more contact.

So we are a fluid mix of Essence and ego, of “positive” and “negative” traits, of character and personality—we all know our divine potential and yearn to have contact with it. But we can’t ignore the fact that we are not in communion with our True Nature (Level 1), or even in the Healthy Levels, most of the time. Acknowledging the truth of our situation, clearly and objectively, is part of our healing and our ability to connect with the more “positive” aspects of the types, what Almaas refers to as the maturation of our personality over time.

Even if “the ego is a reflection, an imperfect one indeed, but still a reflection of true reality, we will see that by understanding ego, rather than transcending it, we can understand and actualize the reality of what it is to be a human being.” (*The Pearl Beyond Price*, p. 17). At any moment, we are always a mixture of ego and Essence, and our commitment to uncovering the “true human being” within us is the path we can choose to consciously walk.