

**Setting My Ego Straight: An
Imaginary Conversation with Anthony Damiani
Using Excerpts from *Standing in Your Own Way***

**Prepared for Sancta Sophia Seminary's
Graduate Trimester II: Technologies for Spiritual Emergence
May 2005**

**Alan Berkowitz
Wisdom's Goldenrod Center
for Philosophic Studies**

“The spiritual life is basically an attempt to get back to the wholeness of life, life as a whole, not as a separative thing, to recognize that the life in you is integral, is universal, and not to make the separative ego dominate that or think that it is separate from the rest of life.” P. 83

Part I: What is the Ego?

S: I’m anxious about talking to you, and I’m anxious about my talk at Sancta Sophia.

AD: Your anxiety has got to do with your ego, and the fact that the ego recognizes the fact of the possibility of its non-existence. Have you ever felt yourself as a hollow person? (20)

S: Sometimes I feel empty inside, or like a phony.

AD: You’ll see that the negatives are basically an expression of the ego. The ego could always keep you preoccupied with itself through the negative emotions. See, by sending this smoke screen up, it keeps you preoccupied with itself. And then there’s a deeper anxiety “...there is in the core of our being a basic anxiety, a little empty hole from which all other forms of anxiety and unease draw their strength.” (21)

S: But I also admit having fantasies that everyone will like my presentation and that I will like myself as a result.

AD: Well, you’re wrong. Your ego doesn’t like itself, it *loves* itself, it worships itself, it adores itself. What’s wrong? Well, with that kind of attitude you’re never going to have a cosmic or impersonal point of view. Obviously.... Each and every one of us is going to have to see for ourself what the ego is... when someone praises you and you feel good, in that feeling good, you can *smell* its presence there. (31)

Before you go and give a talk on the ego you’d better learn something about the devious ways the ego operates – it’s strategies, its tremendous comprehension of how to keep you always under it’s power – there’s some spiritual value in that. These are things we have to know. (12)

S: I noticed that lately I’ve felt disgusted with myself and all of my games and stories that I tell myself and then I realized that maybe it was because I was reading your book so much.

AD: A person is not truly and really on the quest until they have that self-hate, until you see the ego as what it is: *your worse enemy*.... so basically you have to understand that the self conceit that’s built into the very nature of the ego is difficult to get rid of. The ego reaches a point where it recognizes that it is itself its own worse enemy. (63)

But if you try and undo yourself, isn't that more doing, and doesn't that strengthen the ego? Consequently; Catch-22, You're in a double-bind...anything you do about it just reinforces it, makes it stronger. (185, 187). Once you start believing in the ego as the reality, you've given up any belief in a higher power. (165)

S: Maybe a mystical experience would help.

AD: You could have a mystical experience, a true authentic glimpse of the Overself, and it could be completely distorted by what the ego brings to bear on it. (51) Let's say you're doing a breathing exercise, in the very act of breathing in, the ego is the agent and to that extent it will modify the forces coming in to you. (202)

S: So what am I supposed to do?

AD: You have to plant yourself firmly in the middle of everything PB says about the ego and go about systematically exploring what he means by it; metaphysically, ontologically, epistemologically, psychologically. You need to see all the various aspects it has – instead of assuming that you know it just because you feel nice and warm here and there, now and then.... I would suggest that we try to get, as much as we can, an overall comprehensive grasp of the many facets that the ego has. (13-14)

S: What are they?

AD: First of all, the ego is dependent on an emotional attachment to separateness. That's what keeps it going. (24).

It is devious and cunning. This evolving entity, through periods of time that are unimaginable, has learned to survive through any and every condition... It will outwit you any time, any day, any place, anywhere (33).

S: I notice that even when I think I'm being altruistic, or spiritual, or compassionate, that what I'm really doing is advancing my own self-interest, or secretly praising myself. Sometimes I like myself, and sometimes I'm critical of myself.

AD: Remember what PB said, that "There is no real ego but only a succession of thoughts which constitute the "I" process. There is no separate entity forming the personal consciousness but only a series of impressions, ideas, images revolving around a common centre which is completely empty" (92). What you call your identity is this constant, incessant, uninterrupted process of one thought following another. (121)

Your mind is always expecting, anticipating. It's looking to an image all the time, an activity. Its own activity. So after a while you have to recognize that activity or that expectation is probably the chief motivation of the mind's functioning (244).

S: I notice that I distract myself all the time with anticipating and imagining things.

AD: You can take most of the mental activity that goes on in your life during the day and chuck ninety percent out the window and be so much better for it.... Notice the tremendous psychological dissipation that's going on. It's like you've left the electricity on,

and you don't need it. You're just wasting it. It's a dissipation that comes through extraversion and goes on all the time. Dropping the irrelevant thoughts is part of the way we gradually learn to surrender our self-will. (65-66)... I'm just suggesting that there is an approach to life where the necessary things that have to be done can be done, and the extraneous reactions and considerations can be left alone, left aside. (71)

S: So then what should I do to transform my ego into this channel and what is its relationship to the Higher Self that it is a channel for.

AD: Well, first your job is to define what the ego is and what we are looking for... You've got to know what it is you are dealing with (11). It's fundamental that you understand PB's notes on the ego (45). Then we can talk about how to transform it and how it operates when transformed.

Part II: Practices for Transforming the Ego

S: So then, if I succeed in understanding the nature of ego and am fed up with its tricks enough to want to change it, what should I do then to perfect it and transform it?

AD: Well, ... There are different ways to build up "what we refer to as the mental perfection of the ego, the mental development of the ego." There are a couple of ways. One is speaking to a teacher or someone you regard as a friend in spiritual matters. Another way is to watch the consequences; that's always very revealing. A third is to use your reason, common sense. (54). And then there are the three things PB just told you: Discipline, meditation, reflection (see quote on p. 108). And what does the Vedantist say you have to do? Self-purificational discipline, concentrational meditation, and reflection. Those are the three things that you have to do. You will not get it any other way. You think somebody's going to come and whisper in your ear, right? (110)

S: and then I can get rid of the ego.

AD: No, you also need to *direct* this ego, dedicate it to a higher ideal, a higher service, and evolve it (247). Remember that PB refers to "the philosophic ideal of a fully developed, mastered, and richly rounded ego acting as a channel for the inspiration and guidance of the Higher Self..." The important thing here is to notice that the development of the ego is one thing, egoism is another (17). That's why it's so important to cultivate a quiet mind, because a quiet mind that's whole and undivided and isn't preoccupied, with the thoughts of the ego. There it stands, prior to the part of itself that identifies with the body. And in that identification with the body's sensation, it thinks itself as the body. (77)

S: Can you be more specific? For instance, how should I go about meditating?

AD: ...when you meditate, you use one thought to try and put down the other thoughts. So you say a japa, you say a mantram, like "Om Bitsu." That's a thought. And the purpose of that thought is to stop and block all the other thoughts, to reduce the multiplicity of thoughts to one thought. So if you keep on saying "Om Bitsu" intensely enough and with enough perseverance, that thought becomes dominant. All the other

thoughts subside in comparison to that. Now you only have one thought to work with, whereas before you had millions (29-30). The basic thing is that in meditation you “use one thought to subdue all the other thoughts.”

S: I find it hard to concentrate on only one thing.

AD: When you sit down to meditate – or you don’t even have to sit down to meditate – there’s an almost incessant chattering going on. Thought follows upon thought endlessly...

And you say to yourself, “I’ve had enough of this. I don’t want to listen to this fellow anymore.” You become very determined that every time an idea or thought or memory – whatever springs up, you will resolutely push it out. Now if you do that, that’s equivalent of showing and expressing, *in act*, your faith in the Higher. But every time that a thought comes into your mind and you give it heed, then you are expressing faith in the lower self, and you believe in your ego. (59-60)

... the important thing here is to bring it down to this very practical level, where every instant you look at your mind, and you keep watching your mind, and you keep trying to eliminate the thoughts that come to it. (69)

S: Sometimes I find that when I’m meditating, after a while, if I get a little quiet, then I get intuitions and ideas about projects I’ve been working on, or problems I’ve been trying to solve. When that happens, is it ok to think about them?

AD: ...I’m a fanatic. Once you sit down to meditate, take out your sword or your battle-axe or your mace, whatever you’ve got, and no matter what it is, no matter how glorious the intuition, cut it off. After that, the intuitions will tell you what to do. (73)

If a person makes a persistent effort to reduce the conceptualizing mind to its barest necessity, she or he will actually at times feel the quietness about them and in them. And she’ll see when a thought comes in – even if it tiptoes – it no longer is silent. It’s like a big noise is coming in. So you begin to recognize that your mind is getting quiet, and you begin to enjoy some of it. (81)

S: But.... the distracting thoughts keep coming back.

AD: When I’m speaking about ferreting out the source of the ego, I’m not speaking about theory; I’m speaking about something you’ve got to do. You’ve got to watch every time a thought comes into your mind. You’ve got to understand the nature of that thought; you’ve got to see what it’s doing. You’ve got to trace it to its origin. You’ve got to keep doing that with the perceptual field, from moment to moment, as it’s going on. You can’t allow yourself to be comfortable in the psyche. It’s what I call “the living dead.” (89-90)

If you’re immersed in the thought stream, you’re in the ego’s consciousness. If you’re not immersed in it, then you’re in the Overself’s consciousness. I’m trying to speak in a practical way. I’m saying something like this: If you pay attention to your thoughts, you’re in the ego; ignore them, you’re out of it.

See how subtle it is? Very, very subtle. Just a shift in attention and emphasis – if the attention shifts into the thought, identifies with the thought, you're in the ego consciousness. Shift the attention out of the ego-consciousness, don't identify with the ego, the thoughts, and you'll be with the Overself...

S: I thought that PB says that you can just look at the thoughts from a perspective outside of the ego.

AD: That's a different practice. There is meditating on one thought so as to exclude other thoughts, and there is the attempt to cut off all thoughts, both which we have been discussing. Then there is another practice, which is taking the position of the observer, or what PB calls the "Witness I."

Every time a thought arises, try to experience this witnessing or this impersonality of consciousness. Try to observe, try to see. But there's no one that sees anything, because as soon as you say there's something there, you are no longer seeing. You're like in a corner of the room or in the balcony somewhere. But if you speak about just seeing, there's no one there. There's only that which is seen, which will include who's seeing and what he or she is seeing. And the best way is to try to do it every time you think of it. Pure observation, pure looking, pure seeing. (108)

S: Is this what PB means when he says: "It's less easy to see and even more necessary to understand that this ego, this subject, is itself an object to a higher part of the mind" (112)

AD: What PB is speaking about in this quote is the Witness I... For instance you wake up from a dream and you see that you don't need the dream ego to operate. So you could wake up from egoistic consciousness and see that you're the Witness I and that you don't need the ego consciousness to work with...

To take the Witness position means that you already know what the ego is. You've stepped out of it once you're in the Witness position. PB recommends certain exercises where he tells you to take the Witness position, because all you need is one glimpse in order to step out of the ego and to see it for what it is. Then when it takes you, you know. (114)

Your ego becomes more objective to you the closer you're identified with the higher consciousness... at that moment you will objectively perceive the way your ego functions. A perception of that nature automatically calls into operation the higher consciousness. You perceive objectively the way your ego functions. (178)... The moment that you see the way your ego subjectively functions, at that moment you have spiritual knowledge. (179)

S: Before you mentioned that being with a spiritual teacher as another form of practice.

AD: The point is that *satsang*, or association with holy people, is not a physical association. It is much more inward. You would know inwardly that this is your teacher.

You know, your heart tells you, “This is my teacher.” You don’t decide to take a trip around the world as soon as you meet her or him. You usually stay with her unless circumstances force you to do something else. (242)

S: What about astrology? Didn’t Edward Conze say that in order to understand Eastern thought you had to be familiar with one of the predictive systems? In that case, can the use of astrology be a spiritual practice?

AD: The only way you are going to see what your attachments and your beliefs are is when you get to know your degrees (i.e. the Sabian symbols in your natal horoscope). Until then you don’t know what your attachments and beliefs are. But when you isolate these things you can take, let’s say, the functioning of a planet in your chart, on a certain degree, and you see that *this is the way you are*.... PB’s not saying “Get rid of it.” You can’t. Because as long as you have to express yourself in the world- and there is nothing wrong with expressing yourself in the world – this is the way you’re going to express yourself. The stupidity is not to understand that this idea that you’re working through to express yourself is an *idea*. It’s not *you*. Try to understand the way you operate – functionally, impersonally. And after a while you’ll see this is that next step – until you understand this, to talk about renouncing the ego is absurd. Because you’re going to see the way these things work *in* you, the way they’re going to trick you and say “Oh sure, now we’ll move on and renounce the ego...”

You can really make a marvelous use of astrology and especially the degree symbolism to understand the particular beliefs and ideas that you are attached to. I wouldn’t use the word “attached,” I’d say you are “*mis-identified with*” If you take one of those ways of working that you identify with, one of those degrees, and you understand the meaning so that it is open and available to you, then you can objectively see that this is the way that you operate. You can learn to be impersonal about your ego and watch that happen. So it’s really worthwhile. That was one of the great values of astrology as far as I was able to see it. (112-113)

S: What about prayer?

AD: You have to make the effort to keep the thoughts out, but at the same time there should always be an aspiration towards the Higher. They have to be kept in balance. It’s not enough to keep pushing the thoughts out. Every now and then prayer, worship, devotion for the Higher, and aspiration also have to find a root, have to find a place. And these two things together make it possible, as he says, for an influx of grace to occur. You cannot force grace, but on the other hand, it can’t come as long as you’re always preoccupied with your business or your farm or whatever preoccupation you may have. It can’t come in. (70)

Remember how we spoke about it? You show your faith in the higher when you reject the thoughts that the ego is proffering you to identify with. Every time you push away the thought and you refuse to identify with it, you’re showing your faith in the higher power. (104)

S: Sometimes, at the end of the day, I’m not sure what if I’ve accomplished anything.

AD: The Pythagorean recall exercise is a good idea, in which you review at night what you did all day long. In almost all the schools, especially the ancient schools, the *one* requirement, the one exercise that everybody was given was: Before you go to sleep at night, try reviewing everything you did during the day. Reflect on what you did, try to understand what you did, try to understand the ideas or values that you were implementing. If you don't, your day is wasted.... You'll be aghast in the beginning at some of what you did, but after a while you learn not to do it, little by little. Little by little a certain impartiality is gained. (110)

(Note: this exercise is one of the "Ultra-Mystic" Short Path exercises that Paul Brunton reviews at the end of his book, "The Wisdom of the Overself.")

S: So in the end, what can I expect from all this?

AD: Over time.... you remain more and more the whole, and you refuse to identify with the part. This doesn't turn you into some kind of clown, letting people use you for a doormat. As soon as you identify with a portion, with that mind which has divided itself into a subject and an object, as soon as you permit that, then the consequences are inevitable. (88)

... we have to think of this ego as all these tendencies, and it is up to us to generate those tendencies that are conducive towards an expansive enlarged version of the ego so that it includes within itself greater and greater comprehension. It is the ego that ultimately and finally, paradoxical as it may sound, gets enlightened. (113)

S: Here's a nice quote from PB that I think sums up what you have been saying:

*The Ego is a part of the divine order of existence.
It must emerge, grow, enslave, and finally be enslaved.*

Note: This dialogue between student and teacher contains excerpts from comments by Anthony Damiani published in "*Standing in Your Own Way: Talks on the Nature of Ego*" (Larson Publications, 1993). These excerpts were organized with comments from a hypothetical student so that the material reads like a dialogue. The book *Standing in Your Own Way* is a collection of transcripts from classes at Wisdom's Goldenrod Center for Philosophic Studies (www.wisdomgoldenrod.org) in which Anthony comments on the Ego category of Paul Brunton's Notebooks. Excerpts are verbatim except for slight editing to render gender neutral and to create transitions that smooth the dialogue.