

The Ego and the Machine: How Capitalism Replaced the Sacred with the Self

Humanity once understood itself as part of something vast and mysterious - the cosmos, the earth, the divine, the eternal rhythm of life. Every culture had its way of saying the same thing: that meaning lies not in possession, but in participation; not in accumulation, but in connection.

Yet in the past few centuries, particularly with the rise of capitalism and industrial modernity, that compass has been inverted. Where the sacred once oriented human life, the **self** has taken the throne. The old quest for transcendence - to go beyond ego - has been replaced by the endless pursuit of ego's gratification.

In the vacuum left by the death of myth, **consumerism became the new religion**, and the marketplace its temple. Humanity traded inner liberation for material abundance, and in doing so, found itself strangely empty.

Indigenous and Ancient Beliefs: Living in the Circle

Long before the rise of modern economies, indigenous and ancient societies lived by cosmologies that dissolved the boundary between self and world. In these cultures, life was not a possession but a relationship, a weaving of reciprocal bonds with the land, the animals, the unseen.

The Web of Life

Among many Native American nations, the world was understood as an **interconnected web** - the "Great Circle" or "Sacred Hoop" - where human beings were kin with animals, plants, rivers, and stars. The Lakota phrase *Mitákuye Oyás'íŋ* - "All my relations" - expresses a metaphysics of **interbeing** centuries before ecological science would echo it.

The self, in this worldview, is not an isolated consciousness but a node in a living network. One's identity is relational - shaped by the community, the ancestors, and the landscape itself. To act without reverence for the whole is to wound oneself. Spiritual maturity, therefore, meant dissolving the illusion of separateness, living with humility among the more-than-human world.

Rituals, offerings, and seasonal ceremonies were not mere superstition but **acts of balance** - acknowledgments that life flows in circles, that giving sustains receiving. The hunter thanked the spirit of the deer; the farmer prayed to the rain; the storyteller invoked the ancestors. All life participated in a sacred exchange.

Ancient Civilizations and the Sacred Cosmos

In ancient Egypt, India, Greece, and Mesoamerica, similar themes appear. The universe was not inert matter but **ensouled** - animated by divine intelligence. The Egyptian concept of *Ma'at* (truth, balance, cosmic order) and the Greek *kosmos* both point to a harmonious totality in which each being has its place.

The role of humanity was not to dominate nature but to **mirror its harmony**. Temples were built as symbolic replicas of the cosmos, and priesthoods served as mediators between worlds. When humanity forgot its cosmic role - when ego and greed disrupted *Ma'at* - disorder followed: famine, war, moral decay.

Taoism: The Flow of Being

In ancient China, **Taoism** carried these intuitions to philosophical refinement. The *Tao Te Ching* teaches that the way (*Tao*) is the source and rhythm of all existence. The sage dissolves the ego through *wu wei* - effortless action - allowing life to live itself through them.

"The highest good is like water," Laozi wrote, "which benefits all things and does not contend." To live contrary to the Tao - striving, forcing, dominating - is to suffer. To return to the Tao is to become transparent, like water flowing downhill, shaped yet unbroken.

Here again, the dissolution of ego is not annihilation but **alignment** - the rediscovery that the personal current is inseparable from the cosmic river.

The Shared Wisdom

Across these diverse traditions - Indigenous, Egyptian, Taoist - the same insight glimmers: that meaning, sanity, and survival depend on remembering that **we belong to the whole**. The self is a temporary expression of something immeasurably larger, a spark in the great fire.

To forget this is the original sin - the fall into separation. To remember it is salvation, long before the word ever meant belief.

Contemporary Religions: The Death of the Separate Self

As humanity's philosophies evolved and formal religions arose, the same mystical thread continued to appear, though expressed in new languages and mythic forms.

Buddhism: The Silence of No-Self

In Buddhism, the teaching of *anattā* - "no-self" - dismantles the illusion of an enduring, independent "I." What we take to be the self is a flux of sensations, perceptions, thoughts, and consciousness. Liberation arises when this delusion dissolves. The end of clinging is *nirvāṇa*, the extinguishing of the ego's fires of craving, aversion, and ignorance.

The Buddhist practitioner trains in mindfulness and compassion precisely to loosen the boundaries of the self. When we see that our thoughts and emotions are transient, we no longer identify with them. What remains is awareness itself - luminous, centerless, free.

The Buddha did not teach us how to be better selves; he taught us how to be **free from self**.

Hinduism: The Infinite Within

In Hindu philosophy, especially Advaita Vedānta, the ego is a veil of ignorance (*avidyā*). Beneath it lies *Ātman*, the true Self, which is not personal but identical with *Brahman* - the infinite ground of being.

The famous Upanishadic phrase *Tat Tvam Asi* - "Thou art That" - declares that the essence of the individual is the same as the essence of the cosmos. The path to liberation (*moksha*) is therefore not the perfection of individuality but its transcendence.

When the wave realizes it is water, the ocean of being reveals itself. The ego dissolves not into nothingness but into infinity.

Islam and Sufism: The Annihilation in the Beloved

In Islam, the ultimate truth is *tawḥīd* - the unity of all existence in the oneness of God. The mystics of Islam, the **Sufis**, turned this doctrine into a living experience. Through remembrance (*dhikr*) and love, the seeker's ego melts in the radiance of the Beloved until only God remains.

The story of the **Flying Sufi** embodies this truth. A dervish, through deep devotion, learns to fly. But as he soars, a thought crosses his mind: "*What will my family think when they hear I can fly?*" Instantly, he falls to earth. His teacher tells him, "You were flying well, but you looked back." The moment self-consciousness returns, grace disappears.

In Sufism, this is called *fanā'* - the annihilation of self in God. But this annihilation is followed by *baqā'* - subsistence in God. The ego dies, and what remains is pure presence.

Judaism: The Nullification of the Self

In Kabbalistic Judaism, the mystic seeks *bittul ha-yesh* - the nullification of the "something-ness" of the ego - to encounter *Ein Sof*, the Infinite. The *tzaddik* or righteous person is one who empties themselves so completely that the divine light flows through them without obstruction.

In this mystical language, humility is not modesty but **ontological truth**: only God truly "is." The more the ego dissolves, the more the divine becomes visible in the world.

Christianity: The Emptying and the Indwelling

Christian mysticism offers its own version in the concept of *kenosis* - self-emptying. St. Paul wrote, "I live, yet not I, but Christ liveth in me." For Meister Eckhart, the soul must "become empty of itself" so that God may be born within.

In contemplative Christianity - the lineage of the Desert Fathers, the Cloud of Unknowing, and the Carmelite mystics - prayer is not asking for things but entering **stillness** where the

ego falls silent and divine presence becomes all in all.

Wicca and Paganism: The Sacred Circle Reclaimed

Modern **Wicca** and contemporary Paganism, though often dismissed as “new” religions, carry the ancient memory of immanence - the idea that the divine is *within* the world, not above or beyond it.

In the *Charge of the Goddess*, one of Wicca’s central texts, the Goddess declares:

■ “All acts of love and pleasure are My rituals.”

Here, divinity is not found by fleeing the world but by embracing it fully and reverently. The ego dissolves through **ecstasy and embodiment**, not asceticism.

The ritual circle represents the totality of existence - no hierarchy, no separation. When the High Priestess invokes “the Lady” or the “Lord,” it is not an external deity descending but the awakening of the **divine within and among** all participants.

Seasonal festivals - the Wheel of the Year - teach that death and rebirth, darkness and light, are one continuous pulse. The practitioner learns to see themselves not as master of nature but as its expression. In ecstatic dance, in trance, in communion with earth and sky, the boundary of the self thins until one feels: *I am the forest breathing; I am the moon seeing itself in water.*

Wicca’s path to transcendence, then, is **immanent** rather than vertical. The ego does not dissolve upward into heaven but outward into the living web of the Earth.

Psychology: Maslow and the Science of Transcendence

In the twentieth century, psychology began to rediscover what mystics had always known. Abraham Maslow’s hierarchy of needs became iconic for describing human motivation - from basic survival to love and esteem, culminating in **self-actualization**.

But late in life, Maslow revised his model. Beyond self-actualization, he recognized another stage: **self-transcendence**. Here, the boundary of the self dissolves. One becomes a participant in something greater - whether that is service, creativity, nature, or mystical union.

Modern neuroscience echoes this. When people enter deep meditation, ecstatic prayer, or flow states, the **default mode network** - the part of the brain that maintains our sense of self - quiets down. The subjective correlate is ego-dissolution, accompanied by peace, compassion, and unity.

What Maslow, the Buddha, and the Sufi all observed in their own languages is that **the highest human potential lies not in the perfection of the self, but in its transcendence**.

Capitalism: The Idolatry of the Ego

And yet, the civilization that dominates the modern world is built upon the opposite assumption: that the self must not dissolve but be endlessly **magnified**.

Capitalism, in its psychological essence, depends on the ego's hunger. It thrives by transforming spiritual longing into consumable desire - by convincing us that the void within can be filled with possessions, power, status, and stimulation.

Advertising does not sell products; it **manufactures craving**. It tells us: *You are incomplete - but this will complete you*. It sells salvation through things.

The paradox is tragic: the ego's dissatisfaction, which ancient wisdom sought to heal through transcendence, has become **the engine of the economy**. The void is no longer a spiritual problem - it is a business model.

Thus, what once was seen as the root of suffering - craving, attachment, pride - has been rebranded as virtue: ambition, productivity, achievement. To seek union or stillness is, in this worldview, unproductive - even dangerous, because it threatens the machinery of desire.

The mantra of capitalism is not *"Be still and know,"* but *"Bigger, better, faster, more."* And yet the more we feed the self, the hungrier it becomes. The shopping malls and digital feeds are cathedrals to this restless god - the **idol of the ego** - consuming endlessly, producing nothing that truly satisfies.

Conclusion: The Return of the Sacred

The crisis of modernity is not merely economic or ecological; it is **spiritual**. A civilization organized around the ego cannot sustain itself, because the ego knows no limit. It consumes the earth, each other, and finally itself.

But all around us, there are signs of awakening: people turning to meditation, community, ecological awareness, and new forms of solidarity. Science, too, is beginning to acknowledge what sages long ago declared - that the health of the mind, the planet, and the soul are inseparable.

To dissolve the ego is not to lose oneself; it is to **return home** - to rediscover the unity that was never lost, only forgotten.

The next revolution will not be fought with weapons or algorithms, but with consciousness. When humanity remembers that *we are not the masters of the world, but moments of it*, the sacred will reawaken - not in temples or doctrines, but in every act of awareness, compassion, and simplicity.

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