The Riddle of Ego, Self, and Innermost Self

To borrow the oft-quoted line from Winston Churchill, the 'secret' of Alcoholics Anonymous (and its sister organizations) is 'a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma.' Those who have solved this 'riddle' often smile mysteriously and enigmatically - like the slight and knowing smile of the Sphinx - when trying to explain it. The 'riddle' goes something like this: 'You have to find a Power greater than yourself, but you have to find this Power deep down within yourself.'

What?? If you are like I was, perhaps it is at this stage that you shut down and start asking others what God is, what they use as their Higher Power, or just what the heck 'It' is that we are supposed to rely on.

The answer to this seemingly inevitable question given to me by my first sponsor was 'Good Orderly Direction.' Others have been told, 'Group of Drunks,' or a variety of other responses. In my case, this answer combined with my close-mindedness and fierce 'will to win' led me on a nearly 15-year wild goose chase to 'wrest happiness and success out of this world' by managing life well, that is by getting me some of that 'Good Orderly Direction' in my thinking. (See, page 61 of Alcoholics Anonymous.)

However, there is, I believe, a very straightforward 'key' to solving this 'riddle' and discovering just what the 'secret' (so to speak) of A.A. is - i.e., exactly where and how to access 'a Power' greater than oneself that will solve the alcohol problem and render the alcoholic addict 'happily and usefully whole.' That 'key' is (or was in my case) understanding the relationship between (i) one's 'ego' (ii) one's 'self' and (iii) one's 'innermost self'.

'Ego' is variously defined in metaphysics as 'a conscious thinking subject,' in psychology as 'the part of the mind that reacts to reality and has a sense of individuality,' and in popular usage as 'a sense of self esteem' or pride: (Oxford English Dictionary). 'Self' - in its turn - is defined as 'a person's or things own individuality or essence' and 'a person or thing as the object of introspection or reflective action.' One's 'innermost self' is undefined (although 'one's better self' - defined as 'one's nobler instincts' - comes close.)

The 'key' to the 'riddle' lies in these definitions and, most importantly, in understanding that ego does NOT mean pride in A.A. literature. Almost invariably, "ego" is used interchangeably with 'self'. ('Our actor,' we read on page 61 of the 'Big Book', 'is self centered -- ego-centric, as people like to call it today.') A working definition of both 'ego' and 'self' for our purposes, therefore, may be something like: 'the thinking part of the mind that reacts to reality and has, or gives us, a sense of our own identity and individuality.'
It is this constant inner stream or commentary of thoughts, images and ideas - 'the thinking part of the mind that reacts to reality' - together with their bodies, that the vast majority of people (alcoholic addict and non-addict alike) take themselves to be. It is 'who' they 'are' - or so it seems to them. (Interestingly, Bill W. in the Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions variously calls this constant inner stream of ego/self a 'painful inner dialogue' and 'terrifying ghosts.'

If one can understand that the ego/self is not who we are, but that 'ego' or 'self' is but a fraction of our mind - an attitude or way of relating to the world that is learned - and that underneath that small but loud and unceasing fraction lies 'an innermost self' that is the 'essence' of who we are, then he or she can productively begin to work the 12 Steps, the first of which is: 'to fully concede to (his or her) innermost self that (he or she is) alcoholic' or an addict. (Admitting to one's 'innermost self' that one's life has become, is, and will continue to be 'unmanageable' comes next.)

Consider these points from the 'Big Book' of Alcoholics Anonymous:

- "The problem of the alcoholic centers in his mind, rather than his body.' (Page 23)
- "We alcoholics . . . have lost the ability to control our drinking." (Page 30)
- 'Whether such a person can quit upon a non-spiritual basis depends upon the extent to which he has already lost the power to choose whether he will drink or not.' (Page 34)
- "(T)he actual or potential alcoholic, with hardly an exception, will be absolutely unable to stop drinking on the basis of self-knowledge." (Page 39)
- 'The alcoholic at certain times has no effective defense against the first drink. Except in a few rare cases, neither he nor any other being can provide such a defense. His defense must come from a Higher Power.' (Page 42)
- 'If a mere code of morals or a better philosophy of life were sufficient to overcome alcoholism, many of us would have recovered long ago. But we found that such codes and philosophies did not save us, no matter how hard we tried.' (Pages 44-45)
- 'Our human resources, as marshalled by the will . . . failed utterly.' (Page 45)
- "Lack of power . . . was our dilemma." (Page 45)
- "We had to find a power by which we could live (free of alcohol, drugs, etc.), and it had to be a Power greater than ourselves." (Page 45)
- "(W)here and how were we to find this Power?" (Page 45)
- "(The) main object (of the 'Big Book') is to enable you to find a Power greater than yourself which will solve your problem." (Page 45)
- 'We found the Great Reality deep down within us.' (Page 55)
- "(L)iquor is but a symptom. So we had to get down to causes and conditions.' (Page 64)

So the alcoholic addict learns that the loss of control over liquor, drugs, etc., is not the problem but is symptomatic of a deeper problem that centers in her mind, and that she needs to find a Power
that is greater than her ‘self’. **Self-knowledge will not cut it.** How and where, then, is she to find such a Power that will relieve her symptoms, particularly if she doesn’t believe in a quasi-mythic Old Testament God ‘out there’ somewhere? That, we learn, is the ‘main object’ of the process.

‘**How**’ to find such a Power is quite clear: Do the 12 Steps! But the ‘how’ of doing the Steps if you do not believe in a ‘God’ or ‘Divinity’ which most cultures teach is ‘out there’ is exceedingly difficult, indeed. Fortunately, the ‘where’ of finding a Higher Power is set out on Page 55 of the ‘Big Book’. Here we find a concise rebuttal to the cultural norm that God, Yahweh, Ishwara, Allah, Buddha-mind, the Divine, one’s Depth, the Ground of Being - **whatever one chooses to call It** - is exterior to us.

Although it is often obscured by ‘the calamity, pomp, and worship of other things’ characteristic of the ‘self’ or ‘ego’ (i.e., ‘the thinking part of the mind that reacts to reality and has, or gives us, a sense of our own identity and individuality’), we find that there exists within us ‘an Innermost Self’ that is the ‘Essence’ of our ‘Being.’ It is this ‘Inner Self’ that all the world’s great religious and wisdom traditions seek to activate and develop.

Page 55 sets out, in clear and precise language, that:

> **We (find) that Great Reality,** i.e., our ‘Inner Self’ or ‘Essence’, ‘deep down within us. In the last analysis it is only there that He (or She, or It) may be found.’

In a letter to Bill W., the great psychologist, Dr. Carl Jung, pointed out that: ‘(The alcoholic’s) thirst for alcohol (is) the equivalent, on a low level, of the spiritual thirst of our being for wholeness, expressed in medieval language: union with God.’

Although he was much concerned that he would be misunderstood when using such culturally freighted words and concepts, he nonetheless elaborated further on such an ‘experience’ - that is, the psychological and spiritual ‘union with God’ at the heart of all the world’s great wisdom traditions.

‘The only right and legitimate way to such an experience,’ Jung notes, ‘is, that it happens to you in reality and it can only happen to you when you walk on a path which leads you to higher understanding.’ That is, one must follow a spiritual path without aid of drugs or booze, a path or methodology (like the 12 Steps) that leads you to a ‘higher understanding’ and ‘experience’ of one’s mind beyond the ordinary, ego-centric perspective and narrative of ‘self.’

‘You might be led to that goal,’ - i.e., to a ‘spiritual awakening’ of one’s ‘Inner Self’ or ‘Essence’ - Jung points out, ‘by an act of grace or through a personal and honest contact with friends, or through a higher education of the mind beyond the confines or mere rationalism.’ Fortunately for the alcoholic addict, ‘the path’ laid out in the 12 Steps, the work we do, and the fellowship we find in A.A. (or any of its sister organizations) offers all three.
But the key to realizing grace, receiving meaningful friendship, and transcending the mind to a level 'beyond the confines of mere rationalism' is in solving the 'riddle' presented by the 'ego' or 'self' in which we are seemingly confined. In finding our 'Innermost Self', in experiencing our 'Essence' in consciousness, we access the 'mysteries' at the heart of the world's great religions and esoteric traditions. In working our way through the seeming 'paradox' of finding a 'Power' that is at once greater than one's 'self' but which is ultimately found 'deep down within' one's 'Innermost Self', we begin to solve our alcohol problem and we open up to the potential and experience of what Bill W. calls "a new state of consciousness and being."

Our collective experience is that: 'With few exceptions our members find that they have tapped into an unsuspected inner resource which they presently identify with their own conception of a Power greater than themselves. Most of us think this awareness of a Power greater than ourselves is the essence of spiritual experience. Our more religious members call it 'God-consciousness.'" (Alcoholics Anonymous, Appendix II, pages 567-568.)

As Jung succinctly points out in his letter to Bill W., '(A)lcohol in Latin is 'spiritus' and you use the same word for the highest religious experience as well as the most depraving poison. The helpful formula therefore is: 'spiritus contra spiritum.'