

## *Lemon Meringue “I”: Living Outside the Ego Pie*

Ego identities can be perplexing, given that there’s a contradictory conundrum of multiplicity where we expected unity. One of the most useful ways I’ve found to shed some light on all these ego identities is the Lemon Meringue “I” pie analogy. It shows how three of our major identity layers intermesh and shift in predominance, sometimes in rapid succession. To make the analogy pertinent, think of a relationship or situation that has had some ups and downs.

Start by recalling a time when you were at your best: pleasing, competent, charming, smart, on top of things, whatever. This is the *meringue*, the facade we hope others will buy. In less conscious moments, we may buy it ourselves – especially when it seems that everything is riding on being seen a particular way. Now, bite down, all the way to the bottom of the pie, and you find the *soggy crust*. This layer surfaces when we’ve been overturned by rejection or a “bad me” attack. The soggy crust is the low point of our game, leaving us feeling unprotected, weak, and hopeless.

The third layer may not show up until after we’ve endured some bounces between the meringue and the soggy crust: it’s the *sour filling*. Like the meringue, its purpose is to keep our soggy crust out of sight, and it makes itself known more regularly as we get the sinking feeling that the meringue isn’t going to be able to keep the soggy crust from showing up. The sour filling’s motto is “If life gives you lemons, suck ’em!” Sour flavors vary, including resentful, pseudo detached, untrusting, coolly cynical, hardhearted, passive-aggressive, world-weary, and blaming. Unless awareness intervenes, people often retreat into the sour filling increasingly as they age.

People deal differently with these layers of ego identity. Some struggle to keep the meringue intact, which guarantees stiff artificiality. Others give up on the meringue and take up a steady diet of sour lemons. Some plummet readily into the soggy crust

and anguished despair. It's poignant to consider that we'd never be driven to concoct a drippy meringue or to take refuge in the sour filling's bitterness if we weren't convinced deep down that the soggy crust is the awful truth about us.

These seemingly indigestible layers can start to break down when we approach them the same way we would approach an actual pie: ingest and digest. Ingesting starts by acknowledging what's really on our plate, whether it's stiff and sweet, tart, or soggy. Then the digestive enzyme of awareness can do its job: physically, we feel quivers and scrunched-up sensations; mentally, we note our mind's running commentary; and emotionally, we see what mood or tone predominates. The open awareness dimension, via our surroundings, serves as a plate for our pie.

Observation allows us to see the layers of our ego more clearly, undercutting the illusion of a solid ego. We see how futile it is to try to create a solid self out of components that are inconsistent, incomplete, and insubstantial. The following worksheet shows the layers in our particular Lemon Meringue "I" pie.

### *Lemon Meringue "I": A Worksheet*

Use this worksheet to see which layers of your particular version of the Lemon Meringue "I" pie you taste in a particular situation. More than one layer is likely to be noticeable, so see if you can identify which is predominant.

The following terms describe each layer of a Lemon Meringue "I" pie:

*Meringue.* Culturally acceptable qualities, the persona we'd like to portray to others, such as positive, upbeat, or deep. This is the layer of false hope, the expectation that the meringue can make our life more fulfilling (for example, "I'm smart").

*Sour filling.* The bitter, hard, protective stance we take when our

meringue fails, such as sarcasm, passive-aggression, contemptuousness, detachment, or blame (for example, “They’re stupid”).

*Soggy crust.* The bottom layer, which we fear is the most real, believes that if others could see the deepest truth about us, they’d see that we’re utterly weak, unprotected, unwanted, incompetent, lacking in self-esteem, needy, lonely, or neurotic (for example, “I’m stupid”).

To proceed, recall and describe a situation, and then fill in the categories with the material that comes up. See if you can function as both observer and experiencer, as if someone else is describing what’s going on, rather than describing “yourself”. This strengthens the objective mental capacity, and decreases the likelihood of reinforcing old identities.

Sometimes the categories elicit predictable responses: embarrassing situations tend toward the soggy crust, while a job interview may be closer to the meringue if you got the job or the sour filling if you didn’t.

See if you can tell which i-pie layer each response reflects.

1. *The Situation.* Describe what’s going on, using physical, active –ing words.
2. *Self-image.* Describe either how you want to be seen, or how you fear you will be seen.
3. *Most believed thoughts.* List the thoughts that arise about this situation, relative to whatever layer comes up (meringue, sour filling, or soggy crust).
4. *False reward or secondary gain.* Is some ego reinforcement in this image, no matter how painful?
5. *State of mind.* Is your state of mind closer to mad, sad, scared, or other? Record how you feel emotionally about this situation.
6. *Behavioral strategy.* Describe the actions you engage in to keep the image of this “I” pie layer intact (for example, meringue:

sounding smart; soggy crust: being pathetic; sour filling: making cynical comments).

7. *Applied awareness.* Review the practice tools you're aware of that seem most helpful for seeing the situation clearly and for becoming aware of which layers of your "I" pie are involved.

How do you see this type of exercise assisting you on the path of awakening, rather than being solely for self-improvement?

Elizabeth Hamilton, excerpted from UNTRAIN YOUR PARROT – AND OTHER NO-NONSENSE INSTRUCTION ON THE PATH OF ZEN, © Shambhala Publications, 2007