

A Letter to Lonny Jarrett

“I’m Just Saying . . .”

In an article titled “The Awakening of Choice” (California Journal of Oriental Medicine, Vol. 18, no. 1, Spring/Summer 2007), Lonny Jarrett describes an essential problem confronting high-quality practice of TCM. Yet his suggestion for righting this problem shows a discernable lack of insight, and contains what is essentially a damaging misapprehension.

While I agree with Lonny Jarrett that “We (practitioners) want to maintain our right to be left alone, so we leave our patient’s alone” - viz. that mediocrity is the rule in terms of the demands that many practitioners make upon their patients precisely because practitioners themselves would rather not be called out on their own misgivings and foibles, their own neuroses and non-sense; after all, it is much less unsettling to simply recite that new age mantra, ‘its all good,’ than to hold oneself to an objective and professional standard. Nonetheless, some part of Jarrett’s grasp of this essential clinical dynamic is wanting.

Mr. Jarrett’s answer to the problem described above is to ‘rid oneself of the ego.’ But what really does this mean? What exactly is the ego and how does Jarrett’s suggestion reveal either a profound insight or a total misapprehension of this essential aspect of the psyche.

The central paradox of the human condition is that “the world exists not merely in itself, but also as it appears to me.” (Jung, p. 230) The problem – of being human, never-mind practicing TCM in North America – is precisely that the human animal is at one and the same time an individual, unlike any other biological phenomenon that has ever or will ever exist; *and also* a member of a society called the human race. The challenge therefore is and has been - since the dawn of modern culture and the resulting civilizations of the last 2000 years - how to strive toward fulfillment of one’s individual role and destiny-potential while playing and interacting within the whole of one’s given society.

The paradox is that we *must* cultivate our individuality (to wit, ego consciousness), *and also* recognize that we are one with other human beings insofar as we share a common consciousness with other life on the planet. Herein lies the challenge – to wit, *when to apply which perspective and in what measure*. In other words, does one ‘toe the line’ and follow the rules of one’s society; or does one go out for oneself to try to find one’s own connection to life and the personal, individual destiny that belongs to them alone and that no one else has been assigned? This eternal question is only marginally related to high-quality practice as I will explain.

My chief objection comes from Mr. Jarrett’s seeming misapprehension of the nature of the ego and its role in coming to the psychological posture that leads to a healthy and empowered life. Like so many of his generation, Jarrett denounces the ego and seems ready to label the world as bad or wrong or otherwise not what it should be – blaming the ego for this iniquity. Nor is this misapprehension insignificant; so pervasive is this misbelief – i.e. that the ego is some sort of demonic possession that leads the individual to ruin - that I have to wonder where such authors derive their definition and (mis)understanding of this most important aspect of the human psyche.

Nor is this misapprehension unique to Lonny Jarrett. Among such latter-day guru’s it has become de rigueur to malign the ego as the root of all human problems. Such poor thinking – as I will explain – is as misguided as it is predictable. Let me therefore take Mr. Jarrett’s supposed argument in a direction it might go, should he reconsider some of the particulars of this poorly thought out stance.

It would seem to me a far better thing to present the nature and particulars of the problem - to wit, the challenge of practicing Chinese medicine in the West and the paradox of the human condition as it pertains to the individual’s ego and the collective interests of a society - and then let all who perceive the issue forward their own answer in accord with their level of understanding; for this particular aspect of integration is surely not a simple one.

Let us examine Jarrett’s puerile stance on this issue of the ego by first looking at how he defines – incorrectly it seems to me – this most central aspect of the human psyche. “The ego constitutes an imagined self, manifested early in life as a young mind’s attempt to cope with an existential crisis. The ego’s fundamental orientation toward life

is that there is a great problem and that something is terribly wrong.” (Jarrett, p. 7) In no uncertain terms, Jarrett goes on to declare that there is no such thing as a healthy-functioning ego, “from a spiritual perspective, it (ego) is the basis of disease itself.” (ibid) Oh really. All ego is disease? There is no value to nor even anything that might be labeled as a healthy functioning ego? Really? Because as James Hillman points out, it is actually illness that defuses the ego. “For what superstars of arrogance we would be without the inbuilt fantasy of defectiveness! Hypochondriacal complaints act like negative feedback, guarding the ego from its delusions of grandeur . . . Hypochondria opens a door out of the ego.” (Hillman, p.81)

Is the reader to presume – as Jarrett’s statements make explicit - that all ego function is a dastardly abomination to be eradicated in favor of adherence to the doctrine of the Orient which commands the individual to disown one’s identity as a unique and unprecedented phenomenon? The reader must conclude that this is exactly the posture proposed by Jarrett. Yet since Mr. Jarrett includes mention of a ‘spiritual perspective,’ I think I am justified in pointing out the tremendous contribution of the Western spiritual tradition – *which is in exact contradistinction to the course proposed by Lonny Jarrett*, and which, it must be admitted, is the exact thing that has such cache in the Orient; namely the following of one’s individual destiny. (Campbell, p. 61)

Witness the appalling inconsistency of Jarrett’s logic when, in the very next paragraph, we read, “Still, (the ego’s) primary focus is on its own healing while the world it is living in is running down around it!” (Jarrett, p. 9) If the ego exists in response to an existential crisis, then whence comes his panicked cry that “the world it is living in is running down around it.” Is the reader supposed merely to overlook the fact that such a statement is nothing if not the trumpeted cry of an existential crisis? What part of Jarrett’s psyche speaks these words? Is that cry not the voice of the ego lamenting an existential crisis? Is that not the function of the diseased ego - as he himself has defined it? Perhaps Jarrett too is taking his own sweet time in healing.

In seeking intelligible answers to the above questions, I must first back up so far as to forward a more viable definition of what he is calling the ego. In addition, it seems important to question Jarrett’s fundamental grasp of Western culture – in particular the Western spiritual tradition; and lastly I must pose the question as to the purpose of

Jarrett's doctrine. Is he saying – as it seems – that it is the world that is wrong and that he holds the answer to how it must be fixed? If so, what could evince a more diseased and inflated ego? An investigation of this concept is in order that we may understand what precisely the ego is and how one may understand this term and the concept it represents. Consider the peculiar message of Mahayana Buddhism – the very kind of discipline and Eastern spiritual doctrine Jarrett would use to back-up his own posture - which declares, “This very world, with all its imperfection, is the Golden Lotus World of perfection.” And – as Joseph Campbell comments – “If one cannot see it this way or bear to see it this way, the fault is not with the world.” (Campbell, p. 97)

Perhaps the fundamental problem with Jarrett's view is one of language and a lack of clarity in the terms – and therefore the concepts – he is using in his argument. It seems that what Jarrett is calling the ego, is actually more properly termed (at least in Western psychology) what Freud called the *id*, “expressions of the primary biological motives of the psyche, the simple “I want” of one's animal nature.” (Campbell, p. 72) I must doubt at the outset that his call to eradicate the ego is actually what he means and advocates. Wanting the world to be a certain way may be part of the ego-function but certainly only a sophomoric ‘wise-fool’ would actually declare with conviction that throwing out the seat of one's consciousness is the way to some sort of illumination.

No lesser authority than Carl Jung – whose work verily defined the growing point of 20th century psychology in the West – offers this insight into the function of ego-consciousness; “So far as we know, consciousness is always ego-consciousness. In order to be conscious of myself, I must be able to distinguish myself from others.” (Jung, p. 164) And why should such a process of distinguishing oneself from others be of value since – as Jarrett seems to profess - this is the chief evil of the human condition? I will answer presently and the reader may decide for him/herself.

Jung goes on to define the ego; “We understand the ego as the complex factor to which all conscious contents are related. It forms as it were, the center of the field of consciousness.” (Jung, p. 139); and this, “the ego is a conscious factor par excellence.” (Jung, p. 141); further still “the ego is the subject of all successful attempts at adaptation . . . the ego therefore has a significant part to play in the psychic economy. Its position

there is so important that there are good grounds for the prejudice that the ego is the center of the personality.” (Jung, p. 143)

Now consider the situation in practicing TCM in North America. The lack is one of high-quality, objective (and therefore peer-reviewable) standards of practice and retrospective analysis. (1) While Jarrett tells one and all that the solution is to get rid of our ego, yet again his understanding of the ego-function is laughably at odds with the necessity of the situation. “Ego . . . is that psychological faculty which relates us *objectively* to external, empirical “reality”: i.e. to the fact-world here and now, and its present possibilities, objectively observed, recognized, judged and evaluated; and to ourselves, so likewise known and judged within it.” (Campbell, p. 73)

The differentiation and discernment that are the fundamental psychological functions of the ego are precisely the aspects needed to relate to the objective world. Seen in this light, there is a *lack* of ego-consciousness within TCM, *not* a surfeit. For how many practitioners still insist that what they do is guided by ‘intuition’? Nor am I alone in perceiving this misapprehension and its deleterious results; “Among a certain segment of the population most interested in Chinese medicine in the West, intuition is valued above rationality . . . If one merely relies on intuition, sometimes one will be right and sometimes one will be wrong. If one thinks through the problem in a rational manner, this margin of error diminishes.” (Flaws, 2007) Ego discernment is the psychological faculty one employs to relate one’s inner process to the outside world – i.e. to objective reality. With such a dearth of objectively verifiable, rational analysis in the majority of Western TCM practitioner’s clinical work, it might actually be in the interest of the profession to *promote* the ego function of discernment and objective judgment, no?

In working with and speaking to Western medical professionals in the past several years, I can tell you that their chief concern and objection to the practice of holistic medicine in the West can be summed up as what they perceive – correctly I think – as a lack of retrospective analysis and objective criteria. When I teach in North America or host students who have trained in North American schools, I find no end of willful confusion regarding TCM methodology – in which the cardinal error seems to be exactly this: an utter disregard for the fact that “a professional TCM pattern discrimination should be objectively grounded in a rational analysis of signs and symptoms according to

agreed upon professional norms.” (ibid) This ability to relate to the world according to an objective standard is, again, a component of ego-discernment.

Jarrett’s poorly thought-out and bowdlerized teaching regarding ‘getting rid of one’s ego’ evinces the same appalling gaff to which so many of his generation fall victim. In truth, Jarrett is merely a kind of spokesperson and representative for many of his baby-boom generation, few of whom dared venture much further down the path of Oriental studies than that pleasant glade of the romantic and bowdlerized version so elegantly depicted by Bob Flaws in his podcast (‘Myths of Chinese Medicine’ http://bluepoppy.com/cfwebstorefb/index.cfm?fuseaction=category.display&category_ID=217).

In addition to Dr. Flaws’ commentary, this issue of having or finding a guru who tells you how to proceed along one’s path, in lieu of finding one’s own way; this father-figure for one’s adulthood, who – in the Orient – counsels students to give up their identification with their ego – is contrary *toto caelo* to the seminal gift of the Western spiritual tradition. Furthermore, failure to recognize the appalling and monstrous nature of life – in which killing and dying are the ineluctable rules – disqualifies at the outset anyone who would sell some ‘better’ version of life in the phenomenal world.

Accepting and even embracing the existential crisis of the human condition is the prerequisite for any further psychological development in adulthood. Children want the world to be a certain way. But adulthood means grasping the vicissitudes of life – which is to say the nature of the life-struggle and the eventual decline into death. This point may even be the sort of final exam to see whether or not one truly gets to pass the threshold into adulthood, or whether one is simply doomed to hang out with the neurotics and ‘save the world’ types who – though well-meaning – create untold havoc by such righteous pretense.

“Those who think – and their name is legion – that they know how the universe could have been better than it is, how it would have been had they created it, without pain, without sorrow, without time, without life, are unfit for illumination. Or those who think – as do many – “Let me first correct society, then get around to myself” are barred from even the outer gate of the mansion of God’s peace.” (Campbell, p. 104)

“All life,” said the Buddha, “is sorrowful”; and so, indeed, it is. Life consuming life: that is the essence of its being, which is forever a becoming. “The world,” said the Buddha “is an ever-burning fire.” And so it is. And that is what one has to affirm, with a yea! A dance! A knowing, solemn, stately dance of the mystic bliss beyond pain that is at the heart of every mythic rite.” (Campbell, p. 103)

But let us take Jarrett at his word. How then shall one get rid of one’s ego? Let us examine the answer forwarded by Oriental tradition.

“For the aim of it all (the Oriental tradition) is to get rid entirely of ego-consciousness, whereas the more we strive, the more we are building up ego, thinking of nothing really but ourselves: “How am I doing?” “Have I made any progress today? This hour? This week? This month? This year? This decade?” There are some who become so attached to all this self-examination that the last thing they really want is disembarkment.” (Campbell, p. 142)

Jarrett’s argument fails to take any consideration of the fact that it is ego-discernment that is the very thing valued and lauded by the people of the Orient. Surely if the East values what we in the West champion, there must be *some* redeeming quality to this supposedly terrible thing he is calling the ego.

“Our (Western) respect for the individual as a unique phenomenon, not to be suppressed in his idiosyncrasies, but cultivated and brought to fulfillment as a gift to the world such as never before was seen on earth, nor will ever appear again, is contrary to the spirit not only of Oriental art but also of oriental life. And in keeping with this turn of mind, the individual is expected not to innovate or invent but to perfect himself in the knowledge and rendition of norms.” (Campbell, p. 106)

“This is why I don’t think the guru thing is as great as it’s supposed to be. It’s an Oriental idea where the uniqueness of the individual is utterly disregarded . . . I’ve spent a long time with Oriental studies. I see nothing that does not say ‘each has the law of his caste or his tradition or his church’ or whatnot to follow. There’s never any indication that you’ve got it right in yourself and that no one (else) knows.” (Campbell, 1997)

Lonny Jarrett tells us there is no such thing as a healthy ego and that all ego consciousness is a disease and should therefore be eradicated. Yet how may one digest such a statement when the ego is the seat of one’s individual consciousness? How so

when in point of fact, the course he proposes – a romantic and poorly understood view of the Oriental tradition - actually *produces* the same psychological faculty he demonizes and encourages us to dissever? Should one follow the lead of a guru like Jarrett who is himself beholden to the same misapprehension his own master guru taught? Should one simply toss aside one's own idea of what is correct in order to perform a duty placed upon one by society?

“Perform your duty” in India means, “Perform without question the assigned duty of your caste.” . . . We in the West, however, no longer think that way; and that is why the Oriental concept of the infallible spiritual mentor, the guru, is no longer of any real use here. It does not work, and it can't work. For our notion of the mature individual is not of a person who simply accepts without question or criticism the dictates and current ideals of his social group, as a child would and should accept the orders of a parent. Our ideal is, rather, of one who through his own experience and considered judgment (and I mean *experienced* judgment, not a parroting of the lectures of some freshman sociology course under old Professor So-and-So with his program for the universe), through his own living, has arrived at some reasoned and reasonable attitudes and will function now not as obedient servant of some unassailable authority but in terms of his own self-responsible determinations. Duty here . . . means thinking, evaluating, and developing an ego: a faculty, that is to say, of independent observation and rational criticism capable of interpreting its environment as well of estimating its own powers in relation to circumstance; and of initiating courses of action, then, that will be relevant not to ideals of the past, but to possibilities of the present. But exactly that is in the East the one forbidden thing.” (Campbell, p. 100)

A cow in a field has no ego. It possesses neither the faculty nor even the desire to differentiate itself from its society. Men have egos; and this faculty of differentiation and individuation – denounced by our colleague – is precisely what makes us distinct among all life forms on the planet. It is the ability to depart from the collective psyche (which Jarrett would have us all return to) that makes men innovative and which thereby brings directed progress to a society and a culture. It is also the championing of this seminal human ability that has allowed the West to so command the world and direct world-culture in the last several centuries. Shall we simply repudiate all the achievements of those singular and brilliant individuals – a disproportionate number of whom have come from the West – so that Jarrett's doctrine of the collective should prevail?

Consider; when I get up to go do my shift at the hospital – though sick with a miserable cold and aching with fatigue – it is my ego-separate-self that compels this action. I am known as a professional who shows up on time and stays until the day’s work is done. And what exactly would be wrong with such ego-compulsion? Is this not a yoking of the ego-function to create a separate-self in line with a more noble and far-reaching aim? Must everyone who plays at healing be of the ‘I must save the world’ bent? Is such a posture not rife with the kind of pretentiously self-absorbed ‘I know what’s best for the world and if only I get my way I can fix what is wrong in this terrible mixed up life’ self-indulgence that – giving Jarrett the benefit of the doubt – one might presume was the real point of his article? Is there really anything wrong with cultivating and maintaining a professional persona – an ego-separate-self – that simply shows up and does good-quality, objectively verifiable and peer-reviewable work?

The gem of Western culture (for all its appalling excess of late) dismissed by Jarrett and his followers is eloquently expressed and summed in the following passage.

“In the modern Western world . . . we ask of the adult something still more than that he should accept without personal criticism and judgment the habits of inherited customs of his local social group. We ask and we are expecting, rather, that he should develop . . . that faculty of the independently observant, freely thinking individual who can evaluate without preconceptions the possibilities of his environment and himself within it, criticizing and creating, not simply reproducing inherited patterns of thought and action, but becoming himself an innovating center, an active, creative center of the life process.” (Campbell, p. 47)

Jarrett, like so many others, seems to evince no real appreciation of the seminal gift bestowed by Western culture and the Western spiritual tradition. This gift may be understood in psychological terms as ‘individuation.’ “The element of differentiation (ego-discernment) *is* the individual. All the highest achievements of virtue . . . are individual.” (Italics mine) (Jung, p. 100) How may one differentiate oneself – viz. *individuate* – without an aspect of consciousness that allows for and is focused on discernment? Is such discernment not ego-discernment - the precise psychological function demonized by Jarrett?

The poor understanding of Mr. Jarrett lies in his dismissal of the seminal gift afforded by Western culture, namely, that the ideal of individuation, which in Jung’s

view is the ideal of psychological health and of an adult life fulfilled, is in the Orient, simply unknown. “Individuation is an ineluctable psychological necessity, we can see from the ascendancy of the collective what very special attention must be paid to this delicate plant of ‘individuality’ if it is not to be smothered.” (Jung, p. 102)

Exactly what is the predictable outcome of such a call to rid oneself of the possibility of individuation? “Society, by automatically stressing all the collective qualities in its individual representatives, puts a premium on mediocrity.” (Jung, p. 101) The whole ‘get rid of your ego’ routine is so predictably geared to create mediocrity that I feel compelled to plead with Jarrett not to broadcast such a wasteful and self-defeating doctrine. Once gone, the opportunity for the individual to strive for greatness may be gone for good; for this process of individuation is of surpassing fragility.

Finally, Jarrett’s own lack of understanding in this matter is best evinced in the dénouement of his article in which he queries and answers, “What is our role as healers? Our role is to help shift the patient’s identification from the small self of the ego . . . to that One self that literally is the will to become at even higher levels of expression *no matter what* . . . I have seen unequivocally that healing at the level of consciousness itself is absolute and merely a matter of self-identification. It’s really a question of just *who* and *what*, do we think we are?” Really?! ‘Who and what we think we are’ is nothing if not the province of ego-discernment; viz. ‘Who and what we think we are’ - the mask one wears in society – is nothing other than a product of the ego; even if that mask is one of a healer.

The deeper implications of the erroneous thinking evinced by Jarrett and so many others who share this poorly thought-out view is neatly displayed in Jarrett’s ‘Evolutionist’ movement. Jarrett’s conviction - in which he and his fellow acolytes tout the teachings of Andrew Cohen with the reverence of scripture - is characteristic of that most insidious of all errors regarding spiritual development. As if every institutionalized religion for the last several thousand years has not already played out before our eyes the very folly of the ‘we have the *real, true, truth*, and only we have it and you can only get access to this truth by joining us and being like us.’ It is this institutional misapprehension of the psychological unfolding of the individual – to wit, of individuation - that makes spiritual development an exclusionary vocation. Those who

cannot recognize the divine in the least and last developed among us, in the mundane and the ‘un-evolved’ have missed the entrance to the very portal they claim to guard.

But – and here is my main point - *good quality practice of TCM is not a spiritual issue*. It is work; and it requires teachers who demand the kind of rigor that would be expected from medical professionals in conventional medicine, not guru’s who sell enlightenment at so much a credit hour.

Jarrett’s poor use of this term (ego) - by which he actually means the *id* of individual desire - is the starting point of no end of confusion in his teaching. The idea that all of Western culture and her precious and unprecedented gift of a personal destiny-path and the uniqueness of the individual should be dismissed in favor of an archaic return to identification with the collective consciousness seems to me to be the single grossest and most puerile misunderstandings of the current epoch. That someone with Lonny Jarrett’s training and influence should tout such a poorly thought-out and indefensible position is indicative of the confusion and factionalism apparent within the TCM world in the West. Where can young practitioners gain the insight so necessary for high-level practice if veteran practitioner-teachers make it their business to promote such a doctrine of confusion?

So while I agree that choice is the essential pivot upon which human growth and potential turn and that it is indeed the seminal gift of the human animal; nonetheless glossing the discriminatory function of the ego – to wit, dismissing this aspect of the psyche in favor of some pretentious claim at divine identification - is an error of the highest magnitude. If all is divinity then so too the fool who identifies with his ‘separate-self.’ So too in fact is the pedagogue who erroneously makes a claim to own the *real* truth regarding spiritual development. So too the one who seeks to make his living, gaining prestige by way of being a professional guru, a phenomenon not altogether wholesome in the West with our central spiritual insight of the uniqueness of the individual.

Thus, it would seem that in fact Jarrett’s findings are not only erroneous, but even inverted. It may be that those who still identify with the sick ego (as he is defining it) *need* to go through the process that such individuation entails and not dismiss their ego-function in favor of identification with some bowdlerized version of Eastern mysticism

that pronounces ego-identification as the ‘root of all illness and unhappiness.’ Rather, many who laud this man’s teachings are indeed – like Jarrett himself – debarred from that greatest of all gifts bestowed by Western culture and society, viz. the chance to follow the dictates of the ego, and thus discern for themselves how best to become an “innovating center, an active, creative center of the life process.” How else might this even be attempted save through ego-discernment and all it entails?

Perhaps rather than dismiss the ego – which of course cannot be done as Campbell and Jung make clear and anyone who possesses that rare ability the think critically can discern – it is better far to teach others how to ‘read’ and ‘listen’ to the signs and symbology that makes up the dialogue between the conscious and the unconscious. ‘Getting rid of the ego’ is the shortest short-cut to mediocrity; whereas directing the conscious ego by means of a study of the symbols and archetypes which ‘speak’ and arise from the unconscious *is* the hero-journey.

So, by all means, take your time in healing. It’s a hell of an education. Learn from your illness, but make sure you get up and go to work on time. Do not ignore your objective connection to the ‘here and now’ in favor of some kind of self-indulgent pretense at healer’s illness. In this way, one may employ one’s ego-discernment to worthy and maybe even noble ends. By all means, let us work together and look beyond our petty and self-serving ends to what is the common-good – which for the foreseeable future is the planet on which we live. In this, to quote Mr. Franklin, “let us all hang together lest we shall all surely hang separately.”

But the ludicrous and unnecessary repudiation of the central gift of the Western spiritual tradition – viz. to go out on one’s own in quest for the treasure of insight which alone brings innovation and directed progress away from the collective mediocrity of one’s society – evinces such an absence of real understanding of our own culture’s strength as to be disqualified of any serious consideration.

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Notes to the text:

1. The considered opinion of two prominent figures in medicine who speak with authority on this matter of why holism and TCM are denied entry into the medical establishment is that it is a discernible lack of rigorous and logical methodology and therefore a resulting lack of retrospective analysis. Dr. Flaws attests to this lack of rigor in TCM education in so many sources that one need look no further than Blue Poppy's website or read any of his numerous articles on the subject of Chinese medical education to hear his thoughts on this point. Dr. Paul Raford, a colleague in the Western medical community who has likewise been involved in teaching at different TCM schools, would also attest to this shortfall. Some part of the issue does have to do with being able to read and also understand research studies coming from China and the methodology and epistemology employed in conducting such research; for this, the work and writing of Ted Kaptchuk has been of some value as he holds a prominent position in the Harvard Medical School. Yet, my own experience reveals a negation of 'linear logic' – an achievement of human consciousness demonized by so many practitioners of TCM in favor of a loosely defined concept of 'intuitive' diagnosis – which is one step this side of the archaic notion of magic or 'channeling.' Repudiating logic in one's methodology is nothing more nor less than a back-lash against the sense of disempowerment so many practitioners feel for being 'left out in the cold' by the medical establishment. Yet what really can be expected when so much of what constitutes TCM is shrouded in this mysterious haze of romanticism and the poorly thought-out ideas evinced by high-level teachers like Lonny Jarrett?