

Jung, the Mind-Body Connection, and Charles Raison

by Kathy Brown

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Charles Raison, MD, of Emory University's Mind-Body institute recently addressed the Atlanta Jung Society about his work related to understanding the links between stress, inflammation, depression and chronic illness. Raison has been researching the effects of compassion meditation, which holds great promise as a treatment for illnesses of the body and soul.

Although he does not identify himself as a Jungian, Raison is familiar with Jung's theories about the psyche from his reading as a young man studying for his undergraduate degree. At the time, he resonated with some of the major tenets of Jung's beliefs about the nature of human psychology and these were later corroborated by his own research and professional experiences. In particular, Raison was struck by Jung's conclusions about the existence of a shared or collective element to human experience, the role that opposition plays within the workings of the psyche and the belief that life is really a quest with an ultimate goal that lends meaning to the hardships endured along the way.

THE COLLECTIVE

Although Raison does not believe in an archetypal collective unconscious in the way Jung envisioned the existence of such a realm, he does see us as being more deeply connected with one another than we are often consciously aware. This interdependence is an important element in the philosophy of Tibetan Buddhism and there is a growing awareness in scientific circles of its relevance to mental health and wellness.

In contrast, the Western world has clung to a romantic notion of rugged individuality. From James Dean to the Lone Ranger, representatives of this cultural ideal are ubiquitous in our society. And it's too bad, because isolation from others leaves us vulnerable to threats to our physical and emotional health.

"The Marlboro men are gone," Raison muses. "They all died from cancer." Here, he is referring not only to the well-known link between smoking and cancer. He is alluding to the less-recognized correlations between cancer and isolation, aloneness and the development of inflammation in the body,

lack of social support and the loss of robust health.

Alone is no way to live and the acknowledgment of this simple truth of human nature is at the heart of the research that Raison is conducting at the Mind-Body Institute of Emory University. Raison was initially drawn to Emory by his interest in the collaboration the university has forged between Western scientists and Tibetan monks and the potential he saw for applying Western science's measurements and methodologies to some of the core beliefs of Tibetan Buddhism, such as the conviction that social interdependence is an essential element of health and happiness.

Tibetan Buddhists possess an acute awareness of the importance of interdependency for maintaining wellbeing, a viewpoint that Western science is now proving through the work of Raison and others. The Tibetans strive to maintain good relationships, to develop empathy toward people and all sentient beings and to repress anger toward others.

The Buddhists use their belief in reincarnation to remind them to treat others with empathy and kindness. In Buddhist thought, anyone you hurt may have been your mother in a past life or will possibly be your own beloved child in the next. You would not want to harm someone who was or will be so dear to you.

Although the Buddhist practice of compassion meditation is based on beliefs about karma and reincarnation, religious references were removed from Raison's research study. Participants were taught how to meditate by visualizing themselves being of service to others as a way to create empathy for others, which is the value at the core of compassion meditation.

TENSION OF THE OPPOSITES

Jung observed that whatever could be said to be true about an individual indicated the presence of the opposite truth within the unconscious. A person who was extremely kind could be understood as also possessing an equal, though unconscious, penchant for cruelty. Jung believed that the distance between these oppositions decreased over time as people aged and their maturity levels increased. He related this movement toward a more balanced and less energized place to the concept of entropy in physics, a term that refers to a flattening of energies or the loss of heat that occurs when work is done.

In his early medical career as Director of Emergency Psychiatric Services at UCLA, Raison saw first-hand that

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patients with severe psychological pathology flip-flopped between extremes in their personalities. “As much as they loved you one minute, they would hate you the next,” he said of his experiences with these patients. “They were just not able to find a balance between those opposing forces.”

Raison pointed out that parallels of this idea can be found in the writings of Aristotle, who urged those who would be wise to follow the Golden Mean, that is, to seek out the balance between extremes. Neuroscience, chaos theory, and the philosophical treatises of Immanuel Kant and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel likewise reflect an awareness of the interplay between polar opposites that seem to be driven by some natural force to provide balance.

So does Buddhism. As science learns more about the aspects of Buddhism that can be translated into a secular philosophy that effectively provides a regime of good mental health practices, the caution to take the Middle Path is sure to join its ranks. This Buddhist concept refers to the value of taking a neutral, unbiased attitude toward life, a stance scientists such as Raison seek to maintain as they explore the mysteries of the human psyche.

LIFE AS QUEST

Jung believed that life stories emerge based on a pattern of striving through life’s challenges in the interest of discovering or recovering something that is bigger than the trials we experience along the way.

The best known story of the quest genre is of course the Quest for the Holy Grail which emerged from 12th century Europe and remains popular today. In this saga, the knights of King Arthur’s court face dragons and rescue damsels as they search for the magical chalice that held the blood of Christ. Percival, the knight who finally claims the grail, is allowed to receive it because the pain and problems he has endured along the way have contributed to purifying him to the extent that he is worthy of this treasure.

A similar idea is found in the story of Atisha, an 8th century Indian sage who was charged with restoring Buddhism to Tibet. As Raison tells the story, Atisha almost left Tibet upon discovering how pleasant its citizens were, since only the presence of an enemy, and the hardships that accrued from discord with another person, could result in the continuing spiritual growth that led to enlightenment.

The story of the grail quest is told in different ways by different writers. In some versions, Christ drank from this golden cup at the last supper; others say that the vessel was a repository for Christ’s blood, caught during his crucifixion or interment.

Percival is said to have recovered the grail after he asked the “right” question. Some writers claim that the question was, “Whom does the grail serve?” In asking this, Percival was thought to have understood that the meaning of the grail was seen to be about service to others, rather than about obtaining a valuable gold object, even one that had been touched by Christ.

In other versions, Percival asks whom the grail serves on his first contact with it, but this was the wrong question, asked from a desire to appear to be the kind of person he had not yet become, and so the grail disappeared into the mists for years. In the second version, the question that Percival was supposed to ask was the one that was in his heart, “What ails thee, brother?” as he gazes upon the wounded fisher king who has possession

of the grail. That simple phrase of caring, of feeling empathy for another’s pain, of wanting to be of service, is the essence of compassion meditation.

Raison is working with the Department of Human Resources to deliver training in compassion meditation to at-risk adolescents. The practice holds a lot of promise for the treatment of youth within the system, who may have trouble trusting therapists enough to disclose the painful details of their pasts. The method leaves them in control of their experience and lets them move at their own pace as they experiment with relating to the world in new ways.

When Raison was asked if he and his colleagues at Emory might at some point consider behavioral training, such as the enhancement of social skills, as another way to help people relate to others differently, he said he would not rule it out. For now, the Mind-Body Institute plans to keep working with teaching compassion meditation and finding new ways to accurately measure its effectiveness.

“When it happens inside you,” he said, in words that could have come directly from the mouth of Jung, “It happens in the world.”