

DEAR UNCLE

Richard Mann

Did you know what you were getting me into? The East-West Weekend seminar series started tonight, and my mind is still spinning. I could use a little help, please, and since this is your field. . .

For starters, what is this thing about “the ego?” All the seminar speakers were here tonight, for a sort of overview, and by the time the first two had spoken it was already a battle royal. The first speaker was Hindu, a retired lawyer it turned out, and he talked about the ashram he’s been going to for years. Among other things, he said that right by the shoe rack there’s a sign. It says: Leave Your Ego with Your Shoes. Well, that did it! The guy who was supposed to speak next, a psychoanalyst, didn’t give the lawyer time to finish his piece.

“That’s the most dangerous and foolish sign I have ever heard of!” he yelled. He went on and on about how he’d heard that in the East they worship the Void (or was it Nirvana?). “Why,” he said, “the ego is the human being’s greatest achievement. Why would anyone want to get rid of it?”

Well, I couldn’t make any sense out of the argument. The lawyer stood his ground. But I still wonder, what did he mean that our ego is our worst enemy? I wish you’d been here, Uncle. Drop me a line if you have time. Thanks.

Dear Nephew,

Sounds like the seminar started off with a bang! I’m all too familiar with this kind of verbal fireworks. And I’m sorry to tell you, most of it is just noise, just mutual misunderstanding. They’re both using the same word, ego, but they really don’t mean the same thing at all. In case it comes up again, which I suspect it will, let me show how they are just talking past each other. (And how they are both correct in what they are saying.)

When he uses the word *ego*, the psychoanalyst is pointing at several obvious features of our mental life. Here's a quiz for you:

(1) Isn't it true that you are able, sometimes, to be aware of what you are thinking?

(2) Isn't it true that you are more or less in charge of shaping yourself into becoming a certain kind of person, and not some other?

(3) Isn't it true that you can, at least occasionally, control your impulses and decide on a rational basis what you will be, what you will do?

(4) Isn't it true that you can use the highly abstract rules of logic to reach conclusions that are not at all obvious?

If you answered yes to all four questions, then you are (as I would have guessed) in full possession of a complex human function called the "ego" by Western psychology. But even though Freud's work established this label for all these diverse functions, there's nothing new about the underlying observation. For thousands of years we human beings have enjoyed discussing why we are "higher" than the animals and why Junior is so much easier to deal with now than when he was three months, or three years, old. It's that great advance, of humans over animals and adults over children, that the good psychoanalyst didn't want anyone leaving with their shoes.

But the funny part is that the sign by the ashram shoe rack was asking for no such sacrifice. The Hindu tradition values being able to think rationally, to be self-reflective, to control your impulses, and to be "planful" every bit as much as the Western tradition does. But where the psychoanalyst might say that these are all signs of a strong, healthy ego, the Hindu lawyer would say that these are all signs of a strong, healthy mind. (In Sanskrit this is called the *an-tahkarana*.) They just use different words. So then what does the sign on the shoe rack mean? You'll probably find out in the next few seminars.

Dear Uncle,

I got your letter just in time to read it before the first full lecture of the series. It was that psychoanalyst again, although this time he

was really impressive. He turns out to be a specialist in what he called "ego development." He talked about early infancy, about how a baby learns to tell "me" from "not-me," and to form boundaries. And his main point was that people with "weak egos" are in big trouble. He gave lots and lots of case studies.

I was with him all the way, but then during the question-and-answer session a funny thing happened. An Indian man asked, "But is this all you have to offer us? No higher vision of what it means to be fully developed than just rationality, judgment, 'planfulness', and the like? Is this all you yourself attained from your own didactic analysis?"

I thought the analyst was going to blow up again, but suddenly he sort of shifted gears. Right there in front of us, he started talking in a completely different tone of voice. "No," he said, "this is only part of the story. I also learned about a part of the ego that I haven't even mentioned yet." He told about how, during analysis, he would be lying on the couch, trying to follow "the basic rules," which was to just give his free associations to a dream or a thought, without inhibition. And he couldn't. He'd get embarrassed or fall silent, or dart off to some other topic, fast. Finally, after three or four years of analysis, he had more and more experiences of just allowing his thoughts to come out uncensored. And he told about how sometimes he would just be watching, listening, and this was the big thing—not judging. His tone made it sound like a beautiful experience to be able to really appreciate oneself. He was filled with what he called compassion for himself at those times, compassion for his life, his struggle, his failures and his successes alike.

"That's it!" exclaimed the Indian man who had asked the question. "And what do you call that?"

"The observing ego," the psychoanalyst answered. "And I would never, never want to leave that with my shoes."

"Nor I," replied the Indian, "but we don't call that the 'ego.' We call that the 'Witness.' It is the Self that seems to hover and appreciate and not judge. It is god!"

"Well," replied the analyst, "I wouldn't go that far, but it certainly was a great discovery. And when patients break through to that experience, I am in total awe of such freedom and such accep-

tance. If I were a believer, I might be tempted to say it was a sacred moment, a moment out of time.”

Uncle, it was so moving to be there and see a little progress in this East-West dialogue! I think I'll remember that last exchange long after I've forgotten all about the baby and his primitive ego. And one more thing. There was a weird scene in the last minute or two. A lady stood up and told how her therapist had tried to get her to not come here at all. He had told her that Eastern mysticism was just what she did not need at this point in her therapy. He said she had weak ego boundaries, and he'd also said, "Before you can lose your ego, you have to have one!" She came anyway, but the psychoanalyst's talk sort of shook her up. She was in tears. We ran out of time, and I guess she talked with people afterwards, but I'd be interested in your thoughts about this.

Dear Nephew,

I was touched by your story about the analyst and his "observing ego." That was a nice moment. And I was amused and distressed to hear about the lady with her weak ego boundaries. Amused because, again, people jumble up the two systems of ideas and assume that ego is ego the world round. It's not. But I was distressed because it's true that so many people get the impression that the path of Hindu mysticism is uniquely perilous for people with "loose boundaries." Hey, all paths are perilous for such people.

People with weak ego boundaries can't tell where they leave off and other people begin. They absorb their parents' emotions like a sponge. They want what others want without even knowing they aren't making an independent judgment. They imagine that every blow aimed at anyone is somehow also directed at them. In the West we say such people have an "incompletely developed ego." That's because psychoanalysis is a genetic theory, a theory of childhood development and its consequences for later life.

In the Hindu tradition, such people would never be assumed to have "no ego," or even a weak one. They would be assumed to have an incompletely developed intellect (in Sanskrit it's called the *buddhi*). The word *buddhi* points at all those exquisite human functions that we might call our higher mind—such as our amazing

capacity to isolate discrete objects in time, or discrete objects in space. Or to make that most crucial of discriminations, the one the analysts call the boundary between me and not-me. It also points at our capacity to know the difference between what is transitory, relative, and “of this world,” and what is eternal, absolute, and of the one Self. So if that lady is having a hard time differentiating herself from others, her problem is her buddhi, not her ego or her lack of one.

The ego in the Hindu tradition is wired into the system. It matures as a child grows, but it is there from the beginning, at least after seven months in the womb. Keep in touch.

Dear Uncle,

Thank you for your comments on the buddhi. They came in very handy. Our next speaker was the retired Hindu lawyer. He talked a lot about the ego and “the Self.” He always seemed to be capitalizing it when he mentioned it. The “big-S-Self” he called it. And basically what he was saying was that it’s the ego that stands in the way of experiencing the Self.

The way he talked about this Self-experience reminded me of the Christian saints I studied last term. They had “beatific experiences,” as they called them. They saw lights, felt unity with God, and lived in rapture. Is that any different from what Hindus experience as the Self? Anyway, just then it occurred to me that the ego that stands in the way of all those neat experiences must be something like what we in the West call “sin.” It’s the problem. As you said, it’s wired-in like original sin. Or that’s what I thought when the lawyer was talking about it, since the ego and sin both really come from a sense of separation or pride. (Or is it vice versa?) Actually, the lawyer said that ego was “the I-sense,” but that didn’t ring a bell with me. “I and mine” he kept talking about. What’s that mean?

There was one more point. The psychoanalyst got upset again about “going beyond the ego.” The Indian man was very clear that he and the analyst were referring to a different thing when they used the word ego. He said that whereas the analyst saw the problem as immaturity and impulsivity, which only the ego (in the Western

scheme of things) could overcome, in the Hindu view the ego (he called it the *ahamkara*) reflected the fundamental “human problem.” Because no matter how great it is to attain self-control and a rational, planning mind, the underlying assumption that we are separate is itself the fatal flaw in how we see the world. Well, with that, an older British gentleman spoke up and said that he disagreed strongly with both speakers and he would say why next week. I couldn’t figure out where this guy was coming from. Stay tuned.

Dear Nephew,

Your thoughts on the Hindu-style ego (that *ahamkara*) being like Christian-style sin were most interesting. I see some differences of course, but I think you picked up the flavor of each and correctly recorded the important similarity between them. Bravo! As for your Britisher who disagrees with both of your speakers thus far, I’m interested in hearing more about his presentation.

Dear Uncle,

Well, the Britisher was a Jungian analyst. And an art critic, and a collector of Grecian urns, and a fascinating speaker. I’d studied a little Freud (and a very little Jung) so I wasn’t too surprised that he’d disagree with the Freudian analyst. But what surprised me was how scornful he was of both the Freudians (for being ignorant of what he called “the second half of life”) and the Hindu, for risking something he called “inflation.” It’s where the ego gets completely lost in the Self, he said, and you become ungrounded or out of control. That’s how I got it anyway. What about all this, Uncle?

I’ll say one thing, though, I liked this Jungian’s emphasis on what comes after you develop the ego. He said Freud was writing about human development as if it were a play in two acts: id, or instinct, and ego. And that’s it. But Jung was writing a play in three acts: pre-ego, ego, and post-ego.

He said he agreed with the Hindu view of life in that he also sees the goal as contacting the Self and getting unstuck from what he would call the persona (or mask-like, conventional personality we all adopt just to get by).

I like the idea of a play in three acts. There has to be more to life

than just being one of the gang. There has to be more than just being rational. And this Jungian analyst was at his best when he talked about Blake. He sees Blake as someone who could pierce through the mystery, break with the conventional view of life of his time, and see God face-to-face. Or, as he would put it, experience the Self and defeat the ego. I could feel that here was a Western theory that made room for artistic creativity, for intense prayer, and he even talked about meditation.

But I never got clear what he was so worried about. What is this inflation thing? What's the danger?

Dear Nephew,

I will try to comment on this Jungian's warning about inflation. It's a familiar note for Jungians to strike.

Jung himself was a very brave seeker, but, during the period after his break with Freud, he couldn't keep his mind steady and calm. He had times of being incapacitated, filled with terror or surges of wild exhilaration. And so for him the danger he warns of is all too personal and real.

Unfortunately, Jung never was a very systematic thinker. Concepts get used inconsistently. And so it's never clear exactly how he thinks about what are now called the pre-egoic, egoic, and trans-egoic phases of life.

Before the ego becomes firmly established, says Jung, we are immersed in the "collective unconscious." And for him this is the primal source of our energy, creativity, and emotional life. Act Two, as your man put it, is about making our way in the world. It's about creating (by means of the ego) this set of roles or masks for ourselves. But this comes at a great cost. We lose touch with the deepest layers of our being. Then in the third and final act we may begin to return to our earlier state of connection with the collective unconscious. Jung never makes it clear whether this is the same collective unconscious as when we are babies. Is it really a return, or is it a moving forward? You can find supportive text for either answer in Jung's writings.

What I myself think is that Jung had so many profound, inner experiences that on the one hand he needed a term (like "Self" or

“collective unconscious”) that would serve him in the way God serves some other people. But there was a period where he couldn't sustain these experiences without becoming unglued mentally. The unmodified, pure experience of the Self seemed completely impossible to him. So he concluded that it should not even be attempted. As he put it, the link between ego and Self should never be broken. And Hindu mystics who claim to have totally dissolved the ego were doing so, in his view, only by being totally oblivious to “the real world.” He was always very critical of what he called the seekers after Nirvana.

A part of this mix-up is the same old verbal confusion. The ego he claimed you had to preserve is not the ego of Hindu spirituality. It is the buddhi, that I wrote you of before. And no one, East or West, is really suggesting that being out of touch with reality is some high spiritual state. (Well, there are a few such Western writers, but they're not relevant here.) What always struck me about Jung was that he was utterly without a teacher during all those difficult years. He did have an inner guide, an old man he called Philemon, but even this voice sometimes overwhelmed him and left him uneasy about the journey. Jung became a uniquely creative healer and teacher, but what I learn from his life is that it's terribly hard to sustain this without an outer teacher.

But let me return to this issue of ego inflation. Jung is warning us that, unless we are careful, we become so entranced by the world of ecstatic visions and sublime emotions that we will (1) identify ourselves with that boundaryless, expanded state, and (2) disidentify with our ordinary, everyday self. But the Hindu tradition has an image of what we can attain in this life that answers this fear. It talks about the state of *sahaja samadhi*. A person who is fully liberated in this body is beyond the “I-sense” (or ego, in the Indian scheme), but certainly has not lost the use of the mind's great functions, like the buddhi (intellect).

Do you remember when you and your cousins were swimming in the Dead Sea in Israel? It was so salty you didn't have to paddle to stay afloat. Remember how you said at the end it was like having no arms and legs, and almost having no body? You were so excited about this feeling of lightness and freedom. But did your body dis-

appear, or only your awareness of it? The experience of sahaja samadhi is nothing like losing your mind. In fact, your mind works with maximum clarity and efficiency, since there is so much less weight and clutter from that self-preoccupied “How am I doin’?” consciousness the Hindus call the ego. This is what Jung couldn’t grasp.

To his credit, though, Jung opened our eyes to the great spiritual journey of the second half of life. He knew full well that the ego (in his sense) is both an achievement and, eventually, an impediment to our full growth, or individuation as he would call it. So I gladly overlook his bias against believing in the possibility of total, final liberation. And I don’t take his warning all that seriously, at least for people who have an authentic spiritual guide.

Dear Uncle,

This week the seminar took a quantum leap forward. Instead of all this theory about the ego, Eastern and Western style, we got to hear about a man who lived in this century—a saint, I’d call him. A Hindu monk came and talked about his guru, a saint who did what we’ve just been talking about: he’s gotten free from the clutches of his ego (“in the Hindu sense” as the speaker put it). I’m sending you his autobiography with this letter. Read it. I’ll get another copy. It’s amazing. He has these glorious experiences where he knows he is really one with everyone, and one with God. He has the experience of God right inside himself. But it’s clear that he is totally grounded and practical.

The monk’s talk was great. It left me wishing our theory of human personality made room for getting to such a great state as the one you (and the monk) called sahaja samadhi. No ego!

And you know, the more I think about what holds us back, like my fear of looking stupid or of not being liked, etc., the more I can trace it all back to that assumption I make about being “just” me. When I’m on a roll, I don’t feel limited at all. When I’m playing guitar and jamming, I’m partly me, and partly the music, and partly the other guys. And I’m even the wooden box I’m holding in my arms to make music with! That’s when I feel really alive! So I liked this talk a lot; let me know what you think.

Dear Nephew,

Yes, I agree, it would be great if Western psychology could stretch far enough to include these upper reaches of human development, but here's why it's so hard for that to happen.

First, the great beings and mystics don't endorse a "theory of personality." They endorse a view of life that, unlike the Western scientists' view, is rooted in the direct experience of God. God as the universe, God as the inner Self. Sometimes they tell stories that suggest that until shortly before our birth we all had this experience, this awareness of being That. But the main point is that the ego, the I-sense, the feeling of separateness, is a primal forgetting of our true nature.

But how do we overcome this ego, the false and limiting identification with the mind and body? Through grace. Through the grace of God's guidance in the form of the guru. Just ponder for a moment how such words would clash with the world view of contemporary Western psychologists. But this by no means suggests that these are Eastern ideas. They are at the heart of the Judeo-Christian tradition. It's more obvious when you look at the mystics: the Bal-Shem Tov, Saint Theresa, Eckhart, and even Paul. The "old Adam" who is proud and closed can be transformed; the inner light, the joy, can overcome that separation that the Indians call "ego."

But will these ideas ever be accepted by the Academy? I'm pessimistic.

Dear Uncle,

I have good news for you. There is a new kind of psychology. They call it transpersonal, because it takes us up through childhood and into the ordinary stage of competent adulthood, and then beyond. Beyond the person in the limited sense. Beyond the ego games, beyond the sense of separation. And it isn't just Jung and his followers. In fact, the man who spoke last night lives right near here, and he's written half a dozen books on transpersonal psychology. His name is Ken Wilber. Have you ever heard of him?

He's hard to classify. He's a Western scientist by training, biochemistry I think. But he's also been a seeker ever since his college days. He was turned on by the *Tao Te Ching* and its deep, quiet

certainty that there is only the One. And, he says, only the path that yields this certainty is a path worth following. He's tried the martial arts. He's tried Western therapies. And he's put together a theoretical model that includes Freud, Jung, Piaget, and lots of Buddhist and Hindu thinking.

But he's the one who has really developed this idea of the pre-egoic, egoic, and trans-egoic phases of life. I bought his book, *The Atman Project*, and I'll send it to you if you like.

It's the ego (Western-style) that we spend a long time developing. His way of describing this ego is more like an exercise in cognitive psychology: Piaget, Loevinger. And then it seems to me that he starts using the ideas I first found in yoga: the gross body, the subtle body, and the causal and supracausal bodies. And, with each level of this further development, the ego structures slowly recede into the past. Why? Because these ego structures are themselves an illusion, an illusion of our essential separateness that just won't stand up under the waves of higher and higher experiences.

It reminded me of jamming again, but I'm sure it goes far beyond that. It's clear from what I've been hearing and reading that once a yogi becomes fully realized, he reaches this oneness the transpersonalists talk about. And then where is his ego? It's gone. That's what I want. Some day. But how?

Dear Nephew,

I'm delighted you heard the lecture on transpersonal psychology. I've read several books in this field, and liked them very much. However, it may be a while before you study them in grad school. But so what? There's more in heaven and earth than is contemplated in their philosophies. Right, Horatio?

What matters most right now, dear Nephew, is that you take these ideas and use them to clarify how you see and experience yourself. This is heady stuff, but if that was all it turned out to be, it would be just another wordy debate. What can you do now to find out for yourself if this inner world of ego and self/Self, in both the Eastern and Western sense of the words, is fully real to you? What can you do now to gain more regular access to that fleeting sense,

when you were jamming, of being an unbounded, fluid entity, unrestricted by the usual constraints?

If you want my advice, you could devote some regular part of your day to sitting quietly in meditation, allowing yourself to experience the greater Self, the deeper Self, the subtle and beautiful Self. My own experience is this: if I make space in my own life for the flowering of this lovely inner world, I can never quite forget that whoever I am dealing with during the day is also a person who is filled with light and joy at the deepest levels of their being. No matter how much they tell me that I alone can save them from their inner distress, I know that the truth is that they are already just fine, and maybe I can be helpful in allowing that truth to emerge inside them. Would finding out about meditation be an interesting next step for you? Shall we keep on corresponding like this?