

Ego in the Land of Oz – A Reconciliation

If you were Dorothy in the adventure film “The Wizard of Oz,” what scene in the movie would best fit your life as it is right now? Have you realized that there’s no place like home? In a spiritual or mythological context, what does that phrase mean – *There’s no place like home!* And what does it have to do with ego?

Jesse Stewart, author of *Secrets of the Yellow Brick Road*,^[1] feels it is a difficult phrase to describe or understand with our limited vocabulary. It points to something that transcends ordinary experience so that it can only be alluded to with words, yet not fully recognized until experienced, unless you’re already there. Well where is “there”? Wherever it is and how we get there depends on where we are. As the Good Witch says, “It’s always best to start at the beginning.” And better to begin than not at all.

Dorothy and her companions learn many lessons along the Yellow Brick Road. Their adventures shed light on the role of ego in spiritual development, reconciling Eastern and Western views. Assuming the Yellow Brick Road circles the entire globe, we realize that there really is no East or West and that most of what we experience is perspective. Views reconcile when the veil of duality is lifted and we see into this magic world called Oz. We are thus propelled into a state of being where paradigms shift and interdimensional experience is the norm. So we’re off to see . . . the Ego in the Land of Oz.

Dorothy and house spinning inside the cyclone is one of the most critical scenes in the entire film. It shows how easily we become hypnotized by appearance. As Dorothy is sitting there with Toto on her bed, she is caught up in the inner turmoil, and passively watches as various items fly by outside the window. Suddenly she sees Ms. Gulch on a bicycle. We all know what happens to Ms. Gulch. The question is, how did she do it? Who or what turned Elmira Gulch into the Wicked Witch of the West? Was it you? Was it Dorothy? Actually, I believe it was the Wizard of Oz, or ego. And we all have one of those. So let’s take a closer look at that man behind the curtain, and see what he’s really all about.

Discussion of ego is important at this stage of our adventure, because how one handles the ego is key in all spiritual traditions and mystery schools. The ego is often seen as an obstacle on the Path. However, as we all know, you don’t have to be on a spiritual path to encounter a serious

challenge from the ego – one's own or another's.

Another reason this topic is timely is because it can appear that Eastern and Western views on the ego's rightful or wrongful place on the spiritual Path are at odds. These superficial differences are the source of all the confusion, misinterpretation, and downright disparaging of this enigmatic instrument. It is truly a stumbling block for many students, and that's just not necessary. We must reconcile with the ego as the East must reconcile with the West, because that is where we meet and that is where we are, globally speaking. Therefore, let's agree on a clear definition of ego, for this discussion at least.

Ego is one of those catchall terms that can mean a lot of different things to a lot of different people, even in the secular world. A Webster's dictionary defines ego as "the 'I' or self as distinguished from others; the individual's mental states and sensual experiences, as known through direct introspection."^[ii] The etymology of the word suggests it comes from *eg* – one of the oldest personal pronouns of the first person singular, which grew into the Latin *ego*, meaning "I". "I" comes from the Old English, *ic*.^[iii] It is through the ego that we come to know ourselves as separate identities in the topside world of duality and relativity. Therefore, ego, in this sense, is neither good nor bad, but just something that is -- awareness of a "self" or individuality that appears separate from others.

Sigmund Freud, in his psychoanalytical theory, expanded on this definition. Freud viewed the ego as the mediating force between what he called the *id* and *superego* -- the age-old developmental conflict between the part of us which is purely instinctual and focused on pleasure versus the inhibiting part of us attributed to conscience. The whole stigma around repressed desires revolves around this conflict – the ego's inability to mediate and come to a healthy compromise. Instead of dealing with the problem head-on, the ego often runs away from it, according to Freud, eventually lapsing into denial which becomes a dysfunctional defense mechanism. So when things don't go exactly as the ego wants, it pulls a temper tantrum or hides behind smoke and mirrors shouting, "Pay no attention to that man behind the curtain!" In other words, pay no attention to that individual behind the mask.

Here the ego sometimes hardens into a mask -- another meaning for *persona* or personality. But reflect for a moment on the function of masks. Is a mask good or evil, or does it just serve a purpose? Is it a permanent fixture or can it be changed? Robbers wear masks. So do surgeons. Actors wear masks as do astronauts. Batman and Catwoman wear masks. Sunglasses are a form of mask. Make-up is a mask – one that can

enhance or disguise. Any hat you wear is a subtle mask. But are you the mask? I don't think so. Carl Jung didn't either. He also didn't care for Freud's dim view of the ego.

Returning to its etymological roots, Jung viewed the ego as a person's basic self-awareness or sense of separate individuality – neither good nor bad but malleable all the same. An individual's ego consciousness is shaped by the integration of other aspects of the psyche often symbolized in story by forces beyond our control -- deities, giants, demons, dragons, animals, fairy-godmothers, and in Dorothy's case wicked witches and winged monkeys. It is through an individual's challenges by these elements that they learn their strengths and weaknesses. This is the mystery of the hero archetype.

However, things are not so black and white. There is no morality in ego play – there is just work to do. The hero who slays the dragon doesn't judge or condemn the dragon. In fact, without a dragon or a wicked witch, there could be no hero. Both roles are essential for the birth of higher consciousness as a result of this play. This is why coming to terms with the shadow archetype is so important. The editors of Carl Jung's *Man and His Symbols* reiterate:

Dr. Jung has pointed out that the shadow cast by the conscious mind of the individual contains the hidden, repressed, and unfavorable (or nefarious) aspects of the personality. But this darkness is not just the simple converse of the conscious ego. Just as the ego contains the unfavorable and destructive attitudes, so the shadow has good qualities – normal instincts and creative impulses. Ego and shadow, indeed, although separate, are inextricably linked together in much the same way that thought and feeling are related to each other . . . The ego, nevertheless, is in conflict with the shadow, in what Dr. Jung called “the battle for deliverance.” . . . For most people the dark or negative side of the personality remains unconscious. The hero, on the contrary, must realize that the shadow exists and that he can draw strength from it. He must come to terms with its destructive powers if he is to become sufficiently terrible to overcome the dragon – *i.e.*, before the ego can triumph, it must master and *assimilate* the shadow. (Emphasis added.) [\[iv\]](#)

Jung's analytical psychology places great importance on individuation as a means of realizing the Self. This is where the terminology begins to tangle. Yes, the ego is a self, but a “little” self, of which personality is a component. The big Self, sometimes called the *Higher Self*, is our essence or soul /spirit-identified Self and is often considered immortal. We view the Self as the center of our innermost being – a kind of divinity within. In *The Wizard of Oz*, Dorothy's Higher Self is symbolized by Glinda, the Good Witch of the North. A sense of separation is still implied by this

identification. Even though we may know the separation to be illusory, it still manifests in this manner. A realm exists beyond all this that can't be adequately described with words.

That indescribable realm is represented by the sphere of Kether on the Tree of Life of the Mystical Qabalah. Kether is absolute, undifferentiated, and nondual. (See Appendix 1.) In the West it is known by many names including: *First Matter, Yekhidah, Spirit*. In the East it is like *Rigpa* – a Tibetan Buddhist term for nondual or ever-present naked awareness. Further down on the Tree of Life is the sphere of Tiphareth. Tiphareth is right below Kether on the middle pillar. This is the centered Self of wholeness that Jung talked about – the little ego awareness of a bigger Self or immortal soul that reflects back to us, like a mirror, the realm of Kether. This is the transcendental experience of Self-recognition – a conscious identification with the spiritual oneness we share with all beings.

It might appear that some Western esoteric literature adds to the confusion by calling this big Self or Higher Self, “the Ego” – ego with a capital “E” – in contrast to the little ego, otherwise known as the personality or lower-self. The Ego behind the egos is the Being behind the beings.

To illustrate, take Dr. Paul Foster Case's description of the 13th path on the Tree that links Kether to Tiphareth. The Tarot image attributed to this particular path is the *High Priestess* and the assigned Hebrew letter is *Gimel*, meaning “camel.” Case translates as follows:

Thus, it is a symbol of transportation, commerce, that which unites one point in space with other points and carries news from one place to another. In the Qabalistic system this letter is attributed to the Uniting Intelligence of the thirteenth path on the Tree of Life, joining Tiphareth, the seat of personal ego consciousness, to Kether, the seat of Yekhidah, the Universal Ego consciousness.[\[v\]](#)

As if we didn't already have enough egos to worry about, now we have another one, and it's a really big one! With all these egos running amuck, it's no wonder that some Eastern flavored mysticism advocates doing away with ego altogether. But frankly, that's throwing the baby out with the bath water. That's not really what the great Eastern sages intended. Again, it boils down to what we mean by ego – especially the little ego, since that's where all the fingers point.

A cursory review of the Eastern sacred literature reveals an even dimmer view of ego than Freud's, ranging from “let's get rid of this pesky ego” all the way to outright denial – “there is no ego.” But remember, I said *cursory* review. Buddha didn't write those texts anymore than Jesus authored the

New Testament. Human beings with good and bad intentions had a part in putting together all those various assemblages of the puzzle of truth. Therefore, as with everything else, one must look through, in between and underneath in order to find the appropriate clues and pieces that will help put it back together again.

For instance, Sogyal Rinpoche, one of the foremost experts in Tibetan Buddhism, defines ego as follows:

So ego, then, is the absence of the true knowledge of who we really are, together with its result: a doomed clutching on, at all costs, to a cobbled together and makeshift image of ourselves, an inevitably chameleon charlatan self that keeps alive the fiction of its existence. In Tibetan ego is called *dak dzin*, which means “grasping to a self.” Ego is then defined as incessant movements of grasping at a delusory notion of “I” and “mine,” self and other, and all the concepts, ideas, desire, and activity that will sustain that false construction. Such a grasping is futile from the start and condemned to frustration, for there is no basis or truth in it, and what we are grasping at is by its very nature ungraspable. The fact that we need to grasp at all and go on and on grasping shows that in the depths of our being we know that the self does not inherently exist. From this secretly, unnerving knowledge spring all our fundamental insecurities and fear.^[vi]

On the surface, it appears that Rinpoche is saying the little self does not exist, and this is misleading. I am told that what he really means is that the little self only exists in *relation* to other selves so that by itself the little self *is* illusory, and on one level this is true. Still, Westerners who don't think it out to that extent become easily confused. How can we have compassion for this little self if we don't believe it exists on some level? Therefore, I take issue with how some of these concepts are translated from the Eastern perspective.

At the time of death, the story of an illusory little self comes in real handy because it allows us to relinquish our grasp on what we think life is. But while we are living in flesh and blood, we better have a good sense of ego -- a well-defined, strong and healthy sense of separate identity, or *we will not survive – literally*. Thanks to all those saber-toothed tigers, we were able to do this. Therefore, taking *dak dzin* literally, “grasping to a self” can be useful and even essential from time to time.

The ego is the boundary maker. Without it, we *would* die, and because of it we still die. What do I mean by that? Well, think about guns. Sometimes a gun can save our lives, sometimes it can't. Does that make the gun good or bad? To parrot the cliché, guns don't kill people – people kill people. It's the same way with egos. Egos aren't barricades to spiritual

enlightenment. Egos don't get in the way. It's what we do with the silly thing that makes all the difference in the world. The ego is a tool pure and simple – nothing more, nothing less. The ego is an instrument for functional thinking – a vital part of our being, but not the whole. It is when we mistake it for the whole that all hell breaks loose.

I think the best metaphor for the ego is one I heard many years ago attending a course in transmutation taught by the illustrious Dr. John D. Rankin at Unity Church of Christianity in Houston, Texas. Our textbook was *Self-Mastery* by the psychologist, David Seabury. Dr. Seabury likened the ego to a secretary. Anyone who's ever had the privilege of working with a secretary knows there are good ones and bad ones. Again, it's not really accurate to label the secretary good or bad, it's the *training*. And who is responsible for supervising the secretary? The boss. The secretary can only work within the limitations prescribed by the boss, and that requires acute observation and communication skills. So in a sense, the ego as secretary is the same as ego as computer – garbage in, garbage out. It's not the computer's fault. It's not the secretary's fault.

Secretaries who overstep their boundaries usually get fired. Our egos are the same. But unfortunately, you can't fire your ego. Instead, you must forge a workable truce – maybe do some reprogramming. The goal is to become a proficient *team* – a productive partnership, because it's true – the two must work together. Their roles are meaningless otherwise. Most power is defined by relationship, not inherent position. Training the ego to rightly relate is what practical magic or any form of engaged spirituality is all about. That means getting down to the business of integration.

Dorothy's three travel companions represent the three primary facets of her psyche: Scarecrow = brains (intellect); Tin Man = heart (emotions); and Lion = courage (will). All three must cooperate with her -- with self-consciousness, in order to effectively integrate their skills and get the job done. But if any of them take over the mission by their leadership alone, they fail.

I think that this is one area where Easterners and Westerners can learn much from each other. It would do well for many Americans to relinquish their overgrown sense of pride that results from a grossly misplaced cultural value on the little ego and its attachments. On the other hand, if the Tibetan people had initially developed a well-formed sense of ego and better "grasp" on its place in the scheme of things, they might not have succumbed to China's tyranny. But perhaps that was their saber-toothed tiger – their shadow – and as soon they fully assimilate it, they will be stronger for it. Who's to say? Still, like Dorothy, this is a lesson we must

learn for ourselves, and often the hard way.

Dorothy's last mistake is thinking she has complete mastery over the situation when the Wizard decides to take her back to Kansas in his balloon. That was a lot of "hot air" indeed. It did nothing more than to launch the ego off into the stratosphere causing Dorothy to feel lost and alienated once more. When the Wizard admits he doesn't know how the balloon works and therefore cannot control it, the futility of grasping or relying on this little self for ultimate direction is made clear to Dorothy. Only then does the Higher Self reappear to show Dorothy the real solution to the problem. The good witch, Glinda, reassures Dorothy that she always had the power to go home by virtue of her ruby red slippers.

In the Western mystery schools, red is the color of desire. Only through desire or falling through to the "end" of desire (as it is sometimes similarly stated in the East), can we do this. To follow our heart's desire is to follow a natural path for each of us as unique individuals. In the chapter entitled "There's No Place Like Home" in Joey Green's book, *The Zen of Oz*, the author explains:

The Path to Enlightenment is a personal journey . No one can hand you the answer on a silver platter.[\[vii\]](#)

So the ego must grow up, maybe even fly away to who knows where for a little while until it learns how to handle all that hot air. This is letting go and taking advantage of the present moment. This is exactly what Dorothy does – as soon as she realizes she can. As Lama Surya Das says, "If you cling to nothing, you can handle anything."[\[viii\]](#)

Always, we must tend to our own gardens. No one can do it for us. The best way to deal with another person's out of control ego is to get control of one's own. Sometimes (but not always), getting control means just the opposite – letting go – seeing through – and smiling down on the little self that loves to make mountains out of molehills and who thinks it's the king of all of them, including the forest. In other words, sometimes we need to stop taking ourselves so seriously. Dorothy and her companions had to learn this lesson. So must we. Those three supporting forces must be integrated with the whole or the magic disappears like bubbles.

It's no coincidence that Glinda, the Good Witch of the North, travels in a bubble. The Higher Self is encapsulated in an utterly glistening transparent bubble. It is used for transportation and nothing more. It gets her from point A to point B in a rational, linear fashion, however it seems to appear out of nowhere. Something paradoxical, as essence and nonduality,

begins to manifest when we call upon it to do so. In the words, of Lama Surya Das:

The whole sea is in the bubble, the ego. The bubble is transparent. . . You don't have to get rid of your ego. Just see through it. You don't have to fight with it. The bubble is the sea. And it is dancing in and as the sea already. We don't have to figure it out: yes or no, right or wrong, smaller or bigger, or many or one. These are all just intellectual concepts. It's a paradox, but only to the mind. Can we tolerate the paradox of yes and no, of will on one hand and allowing on the other? Of course, you can give your opinion and do your best, but you also have to be able to let go; you need to maintain the bigger perspective. It's a challenge. There's no easy answer. Better to keep the question alive than come up with some quick, superficial answer. Every moment try to investigate: Where is the Middle Way between the two sides of everything?. . . the model, the concepts, are very limiting. But those are like the bubbles, also. They can be there. You are not just that. This is the View. You are not just that. It's not really a limitation. It's just a momentary form of emptiness. You are not that. You are not stuck there. It's not you anyway. You momentarily experience feelings, thoughts, sensations, but they are not really yours, or anyone's.[\[ix\]](#)

They're just there, those bubbles, and aren't they beautiful? Let us continue to enjoy this incredible diversity of display – to don these beautiful and horrifying masks, and parade about in our silly stories and myriad pageants of gore and glory. But when the show is over, let's not forget to place the costumes where they belong, and to remember, the actor could not act without the one who wrote the script. The soldier could not fight without the general giving orders. And the man behind the curtain is simply the man behind the curtain. The Land of Oz is what we make of it. The Wizard admits that he's actually a very good man committed to service; he's just a very poor wizard. The sooner we see through his shenanigans, the sooner we realize he isn't God – the sooner we can befriend him and allow him to bestow upon us the Self-recognition that we already have deep inside each of us whatever it takes, whatever we desire – to get us all back home.

[\[i\]](#) Jesse Stewart, *Secrets of the Yellow Brick Road*, Sunshine Press, 1997, p. 147.

[\[ii\]](#) Dana F. Kellerman, Ed., *New Webster's Dictionary*, Delair Publishing, 1981.

[\[iii\]](#) Pickett, Joseph P. et al., Eds. *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, 4th Edition, Bartleby.com, 4th Edition, 2000.

[\[iv\]](#) Conceived and edited by Carl G. Jung et al., *Man and His Symbols*, Aldus Books Ltd., 1964, pp. 119-121.

[v] Paul Foster Case, *The True and Invisible Rosicrucian Order*, Samuel Weiser, Inc., 1985, p. 246. Reprinted with permission from Red Wheel/Weiser.

[vi] Sogyal Rinpoche, *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*, Rigpa Fellowship, 1992, pp. 116-117.

[vii] Joey Green, *The Zen of Oz: Ten Spiritual Lessons from Over the Rainbow*, Los Angeles: Renaissance Books, 1998, p. 125.

[viii] Lama Surya Das, *Awakening the Buddha Within*, Broadway Books, 1997, p. 103. Reprinted with permission.

[ix] Lama Surya Das, *Dancing with Life: Dzogchen View, Meditation and Action*, Dzogchen Publications, 1996, p. 62. Reprinted with permission.

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There's no place like home !

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