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Western Coaching and the Ancient Wisdom Traditions: To Initiate a Conversation

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In this article, the author introduces the topic of ancient wisdom, and suggests what the basic differences between Western models of coaching and the Ancient Wisdoms might be. Then he mentions a few avenues we might explore to see how one can enrich the other.

The goal of much coaching in the West, perhaps among less experienced coaches, is to help the client get more money, power and/or status. Executive coaching, personal coaching, and organizational coaching typically assist the client or organization in achieving higher levels of financial success (more sales, higher gross, net, return on investment, etc.), or status and power (promotions, gold medals, your own company, a Ph.D., the Fortune 500 list, etc.) If you are working in a not-for-profit, the goal might be more donations, a new building, or to become a Bishop.

These are good goals. There is nothing wrong with them. They can, and usually do, bring about good results - for the client and for the world in which the client works. However, these are not the goals of the Ancient Wisdom Traditions. The goals of the ancient wisdom traditions are wisdom, compassion, justice, and to become more whole and holy. In the East, the goal is enlightenment. In the West the goal is sanctification (to become holy) and deification (to become more like God). In both cases, this means becoming more of who and what you are — that is becoming more truly human at the deepest levels.

In both East and West, a central element is compassion demonstrated in daily life with all people (or all creatures). The goal is to see things as they truly are, and to love everyone. Ram Dass's famous admonition is: "Love everyone, serve everyone, remember God." Western coaching knows this, but sometimes less experienced coaches may tend to make it an after thought. Instruction about how to be more successful or how to be a better manager will often say or imply something like this: If you follow these directions, you will make more money, move up in your organization, have a smoother running department, and work fewer hours with less stress. The implication is that you will be able to run a larger company, have a better house and car, spend more time with your family, and have more time to work in your church or community.

There are three ways in which the Ancient Wisdom traditions balance or correct the usual ideals of modern Western coaching. First, money, power, and status are goals of the ego, not of the true self (the Self or Atman in the East, the Soul in the West). Second, the goal of life is the full realization of the Self or Soul, not through the ego. True happiness only comes with the full realization of the Self or Soul, not of the ego. True happiness is impossible through the ego. The ego's desire for money, power and status is insatiable. It never gets enough. Third, coaching in the wisdom traditions is designed to help the client or student drop the ego, or more accurately, eliminate the centrality of the ego, and reduce egotism, ego inflation, narcissism and arrogance. That means helping the client or student to (a) reduce attachment to wealth, power and status, in whatever form they may take, (b) reduce the fear of being ordinary and of change, and (c) increase clarity about what is real, what is illusion, and what is really important.¹

In the light of this, what might modern Western coaching have to do with the ancient wisdoms? Here are a few options. First, nearly all theories of adult development distinguish between the goals of the earlier stages of life and the goals of the later stages of life. The final goal for Erikson is Wisdom or Integrity (vs. Despair). In the Maslow hierarchy of needs the highest level is the achievement of what he calls Self-Actualization. In Jung it is psychological wholeness or Individuation. In Hinduism, after a man has lived the life of a student, householder, and community leader, he goes off into the forest with only a robe and a begging bowl and becomes - literally - nobody. He drops all the expertise, power and status he once had to achieve something more — full self realization. Coaching can help clients with the earlier student, householder and community leader stages of life.

A second option is to use the ancient wisdoms to help the client bring balance and perspective into her life.

Every client needs to examine her worlds of work, personal care, family life, and spiritual life. Every client (and every organization) needs balance. Every client (and organization) also needs, from time to time, to review her goals in the light of a more mature and wiser perspective.

Third, coaching often includes some kind of stress management. In the best stress management, one moves into a state of relaxation coupled with alertness. However, in the West we often associate being relaxed with being asleep, and being alert with being tense. In the wisdom traditions, the student is taught to live in a state of relaxed alertness, a kind of mindful ease. Some CEOs have described being able to work in this state.

Fourth, there is a step beyond stress management, a place of deep healing and profound peace. The ancient wisdoms identify a place in the body (usually in the fourth chakra, often called the Heart Center) where one can experience unconditional love for oneself and others, deep compassion, a presence that heals the divisions within oneself, and a deep and abiding peace, a peace that passeth all understanding. A coach can help a client find this place, or find a teacher who can help the client find this place, so that the person can spend some time in this place every day, in meditation or in sanctuary.

Fifth, there is a bias in the West favoring growth solutions over other options, the assumption that Big is Good, and that the way to solve my problem (and sometimes my depression) is to make my company, job, income, net worth, circle of friends, muscles or influence grow. The ancient wisdoms not only challenge this assumption, but often recommend making things smaller. In the Zen tradition, it is not by gathering more knowledge that you achieve your goal, but by cultivating the Don't Know Mind. Small can be beautiful.

Sixth, every coach uses a certain amount of intuition to know what to do and say with a client, and may also teach the client to develop her intuition more fully. The Ancient Wisdom traditions are masters of intuition and its development and refinement. They value intuition (sometimes they refer to it as the knowledge of the heart) above all other kinds of knowing.

Seventh, synchronicity can play a critical part in any career, as every coach knows. While synchronicity² has always been a cornerstone of the ancient wisdoms, it was a somewhat discredited idea until Jung revived it in the West. The ancient wisdoms have always known and taught that everything is connected to everything else: No man is an island.

An eighth option is to use the Ancient Wisdoms to bring a specific kind of value-added to coaching. This means using tools like Tarot, the I Ching, or dream work to help the client uncover trends, goals or desires in the deep psyche. A human life is not only being pushed by needs and goals, but it is also being pulled by desires and longings. This is the teleology of the soul, what Joseph Campbell called following your bliss. Ancient Wisdoms can show us how to do this.

All of these options should be approached with care, but especially this, the ninth option. (The boundary between coaching and psychological counseling must be preserved.) The Ancient Wisdom traditions involve healing: physical, emotional, spiritual, and social. The great wisdom teachers were also healers. At what point, and in what ways, can (or should) coaching initiate, stimulate, or support healing? How can coaching help the client find more balance in her life? Rebuild bridges broken down by alienation? Facilitate forgiveness? Raise levels of honesty with oneself and others? Help change a corporate culture?

At the beginning of this article I described the difference between Western notions of the good life, and the notions of the Ancient Wisdom traditions. I put it too gently. Here, let me make the contrast stark. The goal of life in the modern West - in fact of the whole modern world - is to (a) be somebody, (b) do something, and (c) have something. The goal of life according to the Ancient Wisdom Traditions is to (a) be nobody, (b) do nothing, and (c) have nothing. Happiness resides therein.

Put another way, in the modern West our tendency is to want what we don't have, want to do what we aren't doing, and want to be who we aren't. (Conversely, we don't want what we have, don't want to do what we are doing, and don't want to be who we are.) The Ancient Wisdom Traditions tell us that happiness lies in wanting what we have, loving what we do, and enjoying being who we are. The wisdom traditions hold two premises: Wisdom is the search for a long-term happiness, and wisdom includes the ability to see that this happiness depends on our own actions.

One of the purposes of the *IJCO* is to present for discussion stimulating ideas in the field of personal, executive and organizational coaching. Another is to be self-critical, to be critical of our profession in an enlightened way. We have done this in previous issues, and in this issue the discussion continues.

Postscript

When I first wrote this article some weeks ago, I intentionally chose to set the contrast between organizational coaching and the wisdom traditions in its most extreme form. This is because I wanted to (a)

set the issue as clearly as I could, and (b) avoid the temptation for denial on the part of both coaches and wisdom tradition practitioners.

The issue when set in stark contrast is this: Coaching speaks to the ego's needs for money, power, and status, while the wisdom traditions speak to the soul's need for meaning, compassion and wholeness. I want to make two points about this. First, this is a false contrast. Coaching must also address the soul's need for meaning, compassion and wholeness, if it is to be good coaching. Likewise, practitioners of the wisdom traditions invariably find themselves caught up in issues of power and status, and usually money as well.

The wisdom traditions typically erect organizational barriers to protect the practitioners. Buddhist monks don't handle money. Christian monks and nuns live several miles away from each other. Under the vow of poverty, priests don't own personal property. Even the Pope has a confessor. The Orthodox Rabbi doesn't drive, but rather walks on Saturday. The Indian sadhu has only a robe and a begging bowl.

Every wisdom tradition organization, every religions order, has a "secular" advisor to help them deal wisely with money, power and status. Perhaps every CEO needs a coach to help with the soul's need for meaning, compassion and wholeness. Perhaps, the best organizational coaches are already providing this service.

Second, what coaches say they do, and what they actually do, may be somewhat different. It is easier - and perhaps more effective - to say, "My client had two promotions in eighteen months, and increased her income by 50%." It may be more difficult - and perhaps less effective - to say, "My client spent eighteen months developing a deeper sense of what brings meaning, wholeness and joy to her life." I suspect our coaches may do more of the latter than we know. How do we talk about that second outcome? What language is appropriate for these less tangible, but equally real and equally important, results of coaching?

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Endnotes

¹ In fact, in the East, the teaching is that the ego is not real - it is an illusion. Only the Self or Soul is real. (In most forms of Buddhism, even the Self or Soul is not real.) The goal is never to get rid of the ego itself. The ego is necessary to living. The goal is to reduce attachment, aversion and confusion, all byproducts of ego. In the East, this means moving through the illusion that the ego is ultimately real.

² Jung called synchronicity an acausal connecting principle. That is, two things seem to be related, but we can't say that one causes the other. For example, the day I decide to start my own company, I get a call from an old friend who could turn out to be a client.

³ See C.G. Jung. "Synchronicity: An Acausal Connecting Principle," in *The Structure and Dynamics of the Psyche*, Vol. 8 of *The Collected Works of C.G. Jung*, trans. R.F.C. Hull. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1960.

There is a thing confusedly formed,
Born before heaven and earth.
Silent and void
It stands alone and does not change
Goes round and does not weary,
It is capable of being the mother of the world.
I know not its name
So I style it "the way."

...
Man models himself on earth,
Earth on heaven.
Heaven on the way,
And the way on that which is naturally so.

— Lao-tzu

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