

The Challenge of Aging

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One of the great challenges of aging is that ailments frequently descend on individuals for no apparent reason. People who have been generally “healthy” and fit suddenly find themselves confronted by pains and other limitations. Sometimes, serious illnesses arise without discernable precipitating factors. Many people are left with the awful questions: “Why me?” and “Why now?”

Most often patients simply complain that they’ve now unable to do certain things that they’ve “always done.” Many “retired” people note that they’ve decreased their external stressors, and hence believe their sources of distress have been resolved. They wonder how emotional and spiritual factors can contribute to their current ailments. The conceptual and emotional challenge faced by patients and practitioners alike is that most people think they experience life in the present.

We fail to adequately understand the prevalence of projection, and how it brings an individual’s unfulfilled past struggles into the present. Each individual has a complex (and generally unconscious) set of habituated interpretations and reactions toward experience that “color” their lives. Those habituations inform people concerning their roles in the social fabric, and limit their sense of what’s possible. We each interact with the world of challenges and opportunities through a “coming from,” which structures our individual experience.

Each individual’s awareness of what happens (in the present) is subject to distortions based in unconscious interpretations that are projected onto all circumstances and events. People frequently carry the past into the present without realizing, through their projections such as victimization, inadequacy, aggression, and astonishment/disbelief. The meanings that people draw from their experiences in life derive from these habituated projections, so life often becomes self-fulfilling.

The deepest and most central aspects of these personal points of view are formed very early in life. Those early interpretations continue to form the context for all later experiences, unless the individual specifically focuses on reprocessing them and releasing some of their charge. During the first few months of life the newly embodied spirit learns the basics of the physical world. Within several months the baby clearly realizes that he or she is being cared for by another human, and for the next few years babies and toddlers form core interpretations of the social world.

Individual human life is oriented to survive through the combined influences of the *chong* (penetrating) vessel and the *yangqiao* (yang heel) vessel. The embodied spirit is supported (literally, by the firmament), and everything it needs (like air) is freely provided (*chong*). At the same time, individuals must act on their own behalf (*yangqiao*)

to secure shelter, food and drink, and even the freely offered air. Some individuals conceive their worlds as constantly requiring the will to survive (*yangqiao*); they don't recognize the value of willingness (*chong*).

Our awareness of the present is like an iceberg – 90% is beneath the surface. Most people are only consciously aware of about 10% of their experience; the rest is known only somatically and unconsciously. All sensory input is filtered through those habituated patterns of perception and thought (from the past) to facilitate faster processing. These habituated patterns are so pervasive, because they've been embodied to become part of the present physical context of our beings. How (and why) does this occur?

The field of awareness (*shen*) is so vital to human life that individuals are provided with two ways to release unresolved struggles and conflicts. One can truly accept what has happened by releasing his or her point of view, thus release them to the outside; or one can put them out of mind by releasing them to the interior. While these both clear the immediate field of awareness, they convey drastically different future implications.

Release to the:

- exterior – struggle/conflict is gone, the charge behind it diffused
- interior – struggle/conflict is contained and controlled (temporarily)

People develop ways to “handle” or “manage” unresolved issues, which release them to the interior. They are embodied into physical humors, and become part of that person's (physical) context for experiencing the present. In addition to “coloring” our current experience, the embodiment of this unresolved material stores it for future disposition. Old age is the repository of struggles and conflicts, which are rooted in one's point of view. Disease eventually emerges overtly when the embodied spirit fails to maintain that material in a dormant state.

Dormancy is a “mixed blessing.” While it allows individuals to suspend conflicts and delay the resolution of personal struggles, dormancy does not eliminate the need for final resolution. Our conscious minds may think we're free of spiritual/emotional issues that have been released to the interior, but they have simply been displaced from the primary channels into storage reservoirs – where they accumulate.

The primary channels regulate current process, which must flow to sustain life. The embodied spirit clears physical humors that are stagnating from the primary channels, and deposits them into the:

- *luo* accumulate blood (emotion)
- divergent channels accumulate fluids, which convey the movement of spirit as *qi*

Both the *luo* vessels and divergent channels fill until their capacity for containment is exceeded, then they overflow into the eight extraordinary vessels. The eight extraordinary vessels act as ditches to absorb excesses (*Nanjing*, Difficulty 27).

An individual's unresolved material accumulates during a lifetime of having experiences and acting in the world. Individuals project values, standards, and core interpretations onto their experiences and interactions. The physical and social worlds don't always conform to our points of view. An individual's attachment to outcomes creates a framework for ongoing struggle.

The five sets of channels and vessels are so important because they present a conceptual framework for discriminating the historical and emotional context of an individual's experience. The more unresolved and unfulfilled experience one accumulates, the more *yuan* (source) *qi* must be devoted to maintain it in a dormant state. At some point, the individual can no longer sustain both the vital (physiological) functions of life, and continue to suspend previously unresolved struggles and conflicts.

The breaking down of dormancy precipitates the emergence of chronic, progressive, and degenerative conditions. While this is often a challenge of aging, individuals can lose the capacity for dormancy at any age, depending on many individual factors. Some ailments, such as rheumatoid arthritis and other auto-immune diseases, typically breach containment early in a patient's life. People exhibit cancers at all ages, and type-2 diabetes has started emerging in children.

We can each pursue (external) lifestyle habits intended to support health, and people have personal (spiritual and emotional) worlds that provides the contexts for future experience. Our patients and we are all accumulating experience, which generally implies that we accumulate at least some unresolved material. We are all subject to losing containment of our unresolved material at any time, and do well to start exploring the habituated attachments and projections that we embody.

My next essay "Facing the Challenges of Aging" will discuss a little known Chinese exercise that is particularly effective for bringing awareness to habitual patterns of activation. These habituations lay the foundation for both the individual's interpretation of experience, and his or her accumulation of unresolved struggles and conflicts.