

The Demon of Materialism

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So I'll be starting talking about the demon of materialism. It's funny that they should chose this one for me. One month ago I gave a talk a bit longer on the dangers of dogmatism and fanaticism in our modern world and I think there is some relation in this. It's interesting, but lately in the Triratna movement there have been very similar talks around this subject and I'm quite passionate about this subject, and I'll get into it.

So what is materialism? What is the demon that materialism entails? Well, it's very interesting to see in the history of materialism - at least in western culture - it seems to be tracked to the Greeks especially the Pre-Socratics and the very beginnings of philosophy. With Socrates, with the Pre-Socratics challenging the superstitions of mythical explanations of the universe, of the very start of the universe, and the way this is trying to bring more rational explanations to our everyday life and the constitution of the universe, the beginning of the universe - as an antithesis of superstitions, the literalism of Greek mythology and faith, religious faith in a way. Recently I read a book - it's really beautiful, it's by Pierre Hadot - it's called *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, and I love this book because he shows something quite different from the idea we have about philosophy. He said that ancient philosophy was something very different from our common understanding of philosophy, just as a mere philosophical discourse divided very systematically into very different branches. So for ancient times it was very much a way of life, it was very much a spiritual practice, a spiritual experience, a religious experience. And I found this quite interesting, because we used to think that Socrates, the great exponent of philosophy and original thought was a materialist, was completely anti-spiritualism, and that's really not the case.

So, yeah, in philosophy the theory of materialism holds that the only thing that exists is matter - that all things are composed of material, and all phenomena including consciousness are the result of interactions. Thoughts, sensations and emotions are merely products of biochemical reactions of the brain. So in this way it is regarded as reductionist, reducing all experience just into matter. Materialism is usually contrasted with idealism. It's quite a big word I won't go into it, but in general to spiritual and theistic views - mainly to denial of trans-material, metaphysical substance, like the existence of God and the soul. And, for these very reasons Buddhism - being atheistic, and phenomenally grounded, and the principle of *pratitya-samutpada* (conditioned co-production), the principle of anatta - is usually regarded with materialistic views. Just until recently this has been the case - this has been quite challenged, but even now some over-enthusiastic rationalists insist that symbolism is a form of humanistic materialism. But with a deeper exploration of Buddhist tradition even the Pali Canon - which is usually regarded as the more rational, the early Buddhism - clearly brings the occurrence of supernatural entities with all the devas and many different hierarchies of the gods, and the two-dimensional nature of the universe and existence. That is the *kamaloka* (the world of physical sensual forms) and of *rupaloka* (the world of form, or better-said the world of non-ordinary and higher states of mind). And the *rupaloka* is rather mysterious, but is even more refined states of mind. And there very

many other references to that. We could put it like, mundane world, samsara, and transcendental world. But I wouldn't want to go into too many technicalities.

It's more important, I think, to question ourselves. What is the problem of materialistic view? Some people argue, especially in the movement of free thinkers, humanists and especially materialists, that we don't need a transcendental or spiritual base to be ethical, promote higher values and culture. Especially if we read a little bit of history, history shows us that in the name of God, religion and many superstitions many cruel and horrific acts have been made with millions of killings, unspeakable tortures and destruction of cultural heritages. But that's easier said in theory than proven in practice. We tend many times to forget that our views have a stronger implication in everyday life than most people suspect. So I really want to emphasize this point: believing that there isn't anything but matter doesn't just throw away the dirty water of superstition, dogmatism and fanaticism but it throws away the baby, in a way to speak, of spiritual values and idealism.

So there are mainly four implications to materialistic views or that's what I thought. One is nihilism, second rampant hedonism, cynicism or extreme skepticism, and indifference and I link this indifference with pseudo-egalitarianism. All of them are related in one way or another. So what is nihilism? Usually it's associated with a materialistic view of existence that negates one or more meaningful aspects of life. It denies an objective purpose or intrinsic value of life. So since all things in the universe are reduced to matter and under mere physical laws, life with its consciousness and amazing cultural spiritual expression are seen as mere coincidence or lucky accident without further spiritual or transcendental meaning.

I don't know about you, but for me it has been very clear in my almost ten years as a Buddhist that at times when I've been over-emphasizing my spiritual life as pure restraint, renunciation and a mere intellectual understanding of the *laksanas* - that's unsatisfactoriness, impermanence and insubstantiality - with a positive and evocative idea of the Spiral Path, especially the Bodhisattva ideal, the importance of *sraddha* or faith, the *brahmaviharas*, all based on the positive emotions of loving-kindness, and the strong and almost longing intuition of the possibility of rebirth. Well, all this insistence on renunciation, on unsatisfactoriness, without these positive aspects have lead me to very trying and depressing times in my spiritual practice. So I've been receiving quite a very lot of favors from very good friends and from my own preceptors, and in my own experience I have been able to test this famous saying of Bhante - based on Buddha himself - that eternalists have a better initial grasp of the Dharma practice. I am convinced that even though eternalism is certainly one extreme of the middle way, annihilationism, where they believe there is nothing after death beyond the body and which is associated with nihilism, is far more dangerous and it is easy to get trapped, especially in modern times. We can get cut off by the indiscriminative ideologies and over-rated values of individualism, democracy and pseudo-egalitarianism. So many, many scholars and philosophers say they've come about as a result of the ideas of the French revolution, the alignment error, death of God, existentialism, positivism, etc., which all seems to be related to reactions to extremism, organized religions, political ideologies and abuses of speculative metaphysics in the history of philosophy. However, this is just the philosophical background, since most people don't even think about it. We just follow the mainstream message and associated values of materialism in the form of consumerism and savage capitalism. We tend to believe the message

of the advertising industry that material things give us happiness. That's supposed to increase our sex appeal, give us comfort, security and excitement through fashionable clothes and electronic gadgets, new diets and treats, and books or new collections of music, etc. One can see in the adverts in the cinema or TV that there is a lot of intelligence put in to manipulate the human psyche and longings. We just want to be happy and they do all they can to convince us to buy our way to happiness. So how surrealist is it that Coca Cola manages to sell us dark colored water full of sugar and toxins and we love it.

So; what do I mean by rampant hedonism - the second point. I mean the compulsion to continually chase immediate pleasure, no matter the consequences. That comes precisely from the belief that there is no further meaning in this life beyond experience of the body, the senses, and survival. Putting it crudely, eating, copulating and defecating. So materialists would say there is no afterlife, no God or spiritual meaning, neither moral consequences to our choices. So just lets party - sex and rock and roll. We want to buy our happiness rather than earn it. We tend to forget the crucial factor that effort and the learning process has in happiness. Bhante has talked quite a lot about it - the positive effort in the Buddhist tradition - but not just that. Modern psychologists and philosophers, even economists, have been doing serious research on the subject of happiness and clearly highlight the importance of effort and learning process to bring real happiness.

So from nihilism comes also radical scepticism and cynicism, and I don't mean by these the philosophical schools - that's a completely different idea actually, something quite positive. It's more the popular modern understanding, the attitude of jaded negativity and a general distrust of the integrity of people's professed motive and their ideals. I found it very interesting and revelatory the first time I heard it in a study group that cynicism is mainly frustrated idealism. I'm pretty sure that it comes from Bhante. I can't find the source, but I heard this several times and it really struck me. I could really relate with this in my own experience. So it comes as a reaction of disappointment to the incongruence between the acts and behavior and the values expressed by political movements or of people we once admired. So cynicism comes with bitter criticism of the idealist who still tries to influence and effect positively the world we live in. How many of us have not been called by our relatives or old friends or acquaintances naïve and even immature for dedicating our lives to the Dharma or spiritual movement, and the spiritual path trying to transform and influence our world rather than pursuing our professional careers, amassing money, making a family with a nice house, a nice dog, and expensive holidays? So with cynicism and extreme skepticism comes indifference. A sense of apathy, hopelessness and impotency on the many world problems and suffering - when people stop believing we can make a difference in our world and when pseudo-egalitarianism and the possibility of a spiritual hierarchy is denied and reduced to the level of matter, resulting in lack of reverence and receptivity. So pseudo-egalitarianism is portrayed as a sensible rational attitude - the best option against abuses of power and authority from religious or political institutions - closing our minds and hearts to the obvious possibility of more experienced and spiritual developed people from which we can learn and benefit a great deal. So under the pretence of individuality, emotional, intellectual and spiritual independence, anti dogmatism, and anti-fanaticism many people close their hearts to the precious opportunity of spiritual receptivity.

So for me this is the core meaning of the attitude of discipleship - which I know for some people

is a bit uncomfortable, but for me it is a very precious, very beautiful word - "discipleship." And for me it involves very much attitude of receptivity to higher values to people more experienced than us. So it's in contrast with a mere intellectual understanding or a vision that any scholar may have on Buddhism or any other spiritual matter.

So what involves taming the demon of materialism? Well, to start with we need to learn to share and simplify our lives, cut down artificial needs and meaningless accumulation of material things, knowledge, or exciting and intoxicating experiences. Generosity is clearly the best way to tame this demon greatly emphasized in all Buddhist traditions with *dana* (generosity) as the first *paramita* (perfection) in the Bodhisattva path of training. It is said it comes naturally out of right view, reflection and insight. So taming the demon of materialism does not mean opposing science but recognizing that there are limitations to scientific knowledge and sharing it. So holding academic and scientific advances provisionally, with sensibility to spur healthy questioning and anti-dogmatic critique of modern views rather than making it the new dogma, making science the new dogma. We need to bring the same anti-dogmatic critique and unbiased reflection to all areas of our life like materialism itself. Look what happens when there is unbridled consumerism and look at the environmental damage - the limited amount of resources for the exponential growth of the population. According to some research, Arthapriya told me, if the entire world were to consume the same amount of resources that the USA consumes we would need twelve planets; but we only have one planet. And the problem with this is that many have to suffer because of this; isn't this absurd? Let's look at the current economical crisis that some naively think is over. Have we learned anything from it? Have we learned anything from history? And it's not the first time it's happened. It seems that many just carry on shopping as the best solution out of this, like Gordon Brown told us to do. Isn't this ironic?

This is certainly a very tricky situation, but at least we can take further steps to simplify our lives - sharing resources like we do in Buddhist communities and in Windhorse. We also need to open up to the mystery of matter and reality, this is maybe a very important way to tame the demon of materialism, especially for those very keen on anti-dogmatic views and anti-dogmatic research. It's very important as well to embrace uncertainty. Modern science has not been able to define matter and understand the mystery of matter and energy in relation to consciousness. It's quite famous nowadays. This is the famous quantum physics of the unpredictability of matter and energy when there is an observer - the famous Heisenberg Principle, of uncertainty. So we need to give way to *sraddha*, or faith, in the way of intuition, investigation and the aesthetic appreciation of greater values and beauty beyond material things.

But it is important to reflect and contemplate the possibility of our materialistic views, and their implications - more than anything - of painful disappointment and reaction to the abuses of power or abuses of influence of religious and political institutions that precisely indulge into extremes of dogmatism and fanaticism. So, what can we do when we feel so disappointed and we feel cynical about history? We need to re-learn, to engage more creatively with ideals and spiritual values, without naivety or passivity that many fear. Mainly through the practice of *kalyana mitrata* - or spiritual friendship - and the actual practice of the very clearly-marked paths of Buddhist tradition towards enlightenment in its many forms. From the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path to the practice of the Precepts, meditation, study, reflection, the paramitas and many other gradual and wonderful practices. So we need to develop spiritual receptivity,

welcome and positively identify ourselves as disciples, if we are to take seriously our going for refuge to the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. We need to embrace the anguish of uncertainty. Like Padmasambhava said, “I do not have, I do not know, I do not understand,” in order to really prepare our minds and hearts for the realization of the deeper and higher truths of wisdom and compassion so central in the Buddhist tradition.