

# Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism

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# Introduction

The following series of talks was given in Boulder, Colorado in the fall of 1970 and the spring of 1971. At that time we were just forming Karma Dzong, our meditation center in Boulder. Although most of my students were sincere in their aspiration to walk on the spiritual path, they brought to it a great deal of confusion, misunderstanding and expectation. Therefore, I found it necessary to present to my students an overview of the path and some warnings as to the dangers along that path.

It now seems that publishing these talks may be helpful to those who have become interested in spiritual disciplines. Walking the spiritual path properly is a very subtle process; it is not something to jump into naively. There are numerous sidetracks which lead to a distorted, ego-centered version of spirituality; we can deceive ourselves into thinking we are developing spiritually when instead we are strengthening our egocentricity through spiritual techniques. This fundamental distortion may be referred to as *spiritual materialism*.

These talks first discuss the various ways in which people involve themselves with spiritual materialism, the many forms of self-deception into which aspirants may fall. After this tour of the sidetracks along the way, we discuss the broad outlines of the true spiritual path.

The approach presented here is a classical Buddhist one—not in a formal sense, but in the sense of presenting the heart of the Buddhist approach to spirituality. Although the Buddhist way is not theistic, it does not contradict the theistic disciplines. Rather the differences between the ways are a matter of emphasis and method. The basic problems of spiritual materialism are common to all spiritual disciplines. The Buddhist approach begins with our confusion and suffering and works toward the unraveling of their origin. The theistic approach begins with the richness of God and works toward raising consciousness so as to experience God's presence. But since the obstacles to relating with God are our confusions and negativities, the theistic approach must also deal with them. Spiritual pride, for example, is as much a problem in theistic disciplines as in Buddhism.

According to the Buddhist tradition, the spiritual path is the process of cutting through our confusion, of uncovering the awakened state of mind. When the awakened state of mind is crowded in by ego and its attendant paranoia, it takes on the character of an underlying instinct. So it is not a matter of building up the awakened state of mind, but rather of burning out the confusions which obstruct it. In the process of burning out these confusions, we discover enlightenment. If the process were otherwise, the awakened state of mind would be a product, dependent upon cause and effect and therefore liable to dissolution. Anything which is created must, sooner or later, die. If enlightenment were created in such a way, there would always be the possibility of ego reasserting itself, causing a return to the confused state. Enlightenment is permanent because we have not produced it; we have merely discovered it. In the Buddhist tradition the analogy of the sun appearing from behind the clouds is often used to explain the discovery of enlightenment. In meditation practice we clear away the

confusion of ego in order to glimpse the awakened state. The absence of ignorance, of being crowded in, of paranoia, opens up a tremendous view of life. One discovers a different way of being.

The heart of the confusion is that man has a sense of self which seems to him to be continuous and solid. When a thought or emotion or event occurs, there is a sense of someone being conscious of what is happening. You sense that *you* are reading these words. This sense of self is actually a transitory, discontinuous event, which in our confusion seems to be quite solid and continuous. Since we take our confused view as being real, we struggle to maintain and enhance this solid self. We try to feed it pleasures and shield it from pain. Experience continually threatens to reveal our transitoriness to us, so we continually struggle to cover up any possibility of discovering our real condition. "But," we might ask, "if our real condition is an awakened state, why are we so busy trying to avoid becoming aware of it?" It is because we have become so absorbed in our confused view of the world, that we consider it real, the only possible world. This struggle to maintain the sense of a solid, continuous self is the action of ego.

Ego, however, is only partially successful in shielding us from pain. It is the dissatisfaction which accompanies ego's struggle that inspires us to examine what we are doing. Since there are always gaps in our self-consciousness, some insight is possible.

An interesting metaphor used in Tibetan Buddhism to describe the functioning of ego is that of the "Three Lords of Materialism": the "Lord of Form," the "Lord of Speech," and the "Lord of Mind." In the discussion of the Three Lords which follows, the words "materialism" and "neurotic" refer to the action of ego.

The Lord of Form refers to the neurotic pursuit of physical

comfort, security and pleasure. Our highly organized and technological society reflects our preoccupation with manipulating physical surroundings so as to shield ourselves from the irritations of the raw, rugged, unpredictable aspects of life. Push-button elevators, pre-packaged meat, air conditioning, flush toilets, private funerals, retirement programs, mass production, weather satellites, bulldozers, fluorescent lighting, nine-to-five jobs, television—all are attempts to create a manageable, safe, predictable, pleasurable world.

The Lord of Form does not signify the physically rich and secure life-situations we create *per se*. Rather it refers to the neurotic preoccupation that drives us to create them, to try to control nature. It is ego's ambition to secure and entertain itself, trying to avoid all irritation. So we cling to our pleasures and possessions, we fear change or force change, we try to create a nest or playground.

The Lord of Speech refers to the use of intellect in relating to our world. We adopt sets of categories which serve as handles, as ways of managing phenomena. The most fully developed products of this tendency are ideologies, the systems of ideas that rationalize, justify and sanctify our lives. Nationalism, communism, existentialism, Christianity, Buddhism—all provide us with identities, rules of action, and interpretations of how and why things happen as they do.

Again, the use of intellect is not in itself the Lord of Speech. The Lord of Speech refers to the inclination on the part of ego to interpret anything that is threatening or irritating in such a way as to neutralize the threat or turn it into something "positive" from ego's point of view. The Lord of Speech refers to the use of concepts as filters to screen us from a direct perception of what is. The concepts are taken too seriously; they are used as tools to solidify our world and ourselves. If

a world of nameable things exists, then “I” as one of the nameable things exists as well. We wish not to leave any room for threatening doubt, uncertainty or confusion.

The Lord of Mind refers to the effort of consciousness to maintain awareness of itself. The Lord of Mind rules when we use spiritual and psychological disciplines as the means of maintaining our self-consciousness, of holding onto our sense of self. Drugs, yoga, prayer, meditation, trances, various psychotherapies—all can be used in this way.

Ego is able to convert everything to its own use, even spirituality. For example, if you have learned of a particularly beneficial meditation technique of spiritual practice, then ego’s attitude is, first to regard it as an object of fascination and, second to examine it. Finally, since ego is seeming solid and cannot really absorb anything, it can only mimic. Thus ego tries to examine and imitate the practice of meditation and the meditative way of life. When we have learned all the tricks and answers of the spiritual game, we automatically try to imitate spirituality, since real involvement would require the complete elimination of ego, and actually the last thing we want to do is to give up the ego completely. However, we cannot experience that which we are trying to imitate; we can only find some area within the bounds of ego that seems to be the same thing. Ego translates everything in terms of its own state of health, its own inherent qualities. It feels a sense of great accomplishment and excitement at having been able to create such a pattern. At last it has created a tangible accomplishment, a confirmation of its own individuality.

If we become successful at maintaining our self-consciousness through spiritual techniques, then genuine spiritual development is highly unlikely. Our mental habits become so strong as to be hard to penetrate. We may even go so far as

to achieve the totally demonic state of complete “Egohood.”

Even though the Lord of Mind is the most powerful in subverting spirituality, still the other two Lords can also rule the spiritual practice. Retreat to nature, isolation, simple, quiet, high people—all can be ways of shielding oneself from irritation, all can be expressions of the Lord of Form. Or perhaps religion may provide us with a rationalization for creating a secure nest, a simple but comfortable home, for acquiring an amiable mate, and a stable, easy job.

The Lord of Speech is involved in spiritual practice as well. In following a spiritual path we may substitute a new religious ideology for our former beliefs, but continue to use it in the old neurotic way. Regardless of how sublime our ideas may be, if we take them too seriously and use them to maintain our ego, we are still being ruled by the Lord of Speech.

Most of us, if we examine our actions, would probably agree that we are ruled by one or more of the Three Lords. “But,” we might ask, “so what? This is simply a description of the human condition. Yes, we know that our technology cannot shield us from war, crime, illness, economic insecurity, laborious work, old age and death; nor can our ideologies shield us from doubt, uncertainty, confusion and disorientation; nor can our therapies protect us from the dissolution of the high states of consciousness that we may temporarily achieve and the disillusionment and anguish that follow. But what else are we to do? The Three Lords seem too powerful to overthrow, and we don’t know what to replace them with.”

The Buddha, troubled by these questions, examined the process by which the Three Lords rule. He questioned why our minds follow them and whether there is another way. He discovered that the Three Lords seduce us by creating a fundamental myth: that we are solid beings. But ultimately the myth is false, a huge hoax, a gigantic fraud, and it is the root of

our suffering. In order to make this discovery he had to break through very elaborate defenses erected by the Three Lords to prevent their subjects from discovering the fundamental deception which is the source of their power. We cannot in any way free ourselves from the domination of the Three Lords unless we too cut through, layer by layer, the elaborate defenses of these Lords.

The Lords' defenses are created out of the material of our minds. This material of mind is used by the Lords in such a way as to maintain the basic myth of solidity. In order to see for ourselves how this process works we must examine our own experience. "But how," we might ask, "are we to conduct the examination? What method or tool are we to use?" The method that the Buddha discovered is meditation. He discovered that struggling to find answers did not work. It was only when there were gaps in his struggle that insights came to him. He began to realize that there was a sane, awake quality within him which manifested itself only in the absence of struggle. So the practice of meditation involves "letting be."

There have been a number of misconceptions regarding meditation. Some people regard it as a trancelike state of mind. Others think of it in terms of training, in the sense of mental gymnastics. But meditation is neither of these, although it does involve dealing with neurotic states of mind. The neurotic state of mind is not difficult or impossible to deal with. It has energy, speed and a certain pattern. The practice of meditation involves *letting be*—trying to go with the pattern, trying to go with the energy and the speed. In this way we learn how to deal with these factors, how to relate with them, not in the sense of causing them to mature in the way we would like, but in the sense of knowing them for what they are and working with their pattern.

There is a story regarding the Buddha which recounts how



he once gave teaching to a famous sitar player who wanted to study meditation. The musician asked, "Should I control my mind or should I completely let go?" The Buddha answered, "Since you are a great musician, tell me how you would tune the strings of your instrument." The musician said, "I would make them not too tight and not too loose." "Likewise," said the Buddha, "in your meditation practice you should not impose anything too forcefully on your mind, nor should you let it wander." That is the teaching of letting the mind *be* in a very open way, of feeling the flow of energy without trying to subdue it and without letting it get out of control, of going with the energy pattern of mind. This is meditation practice.

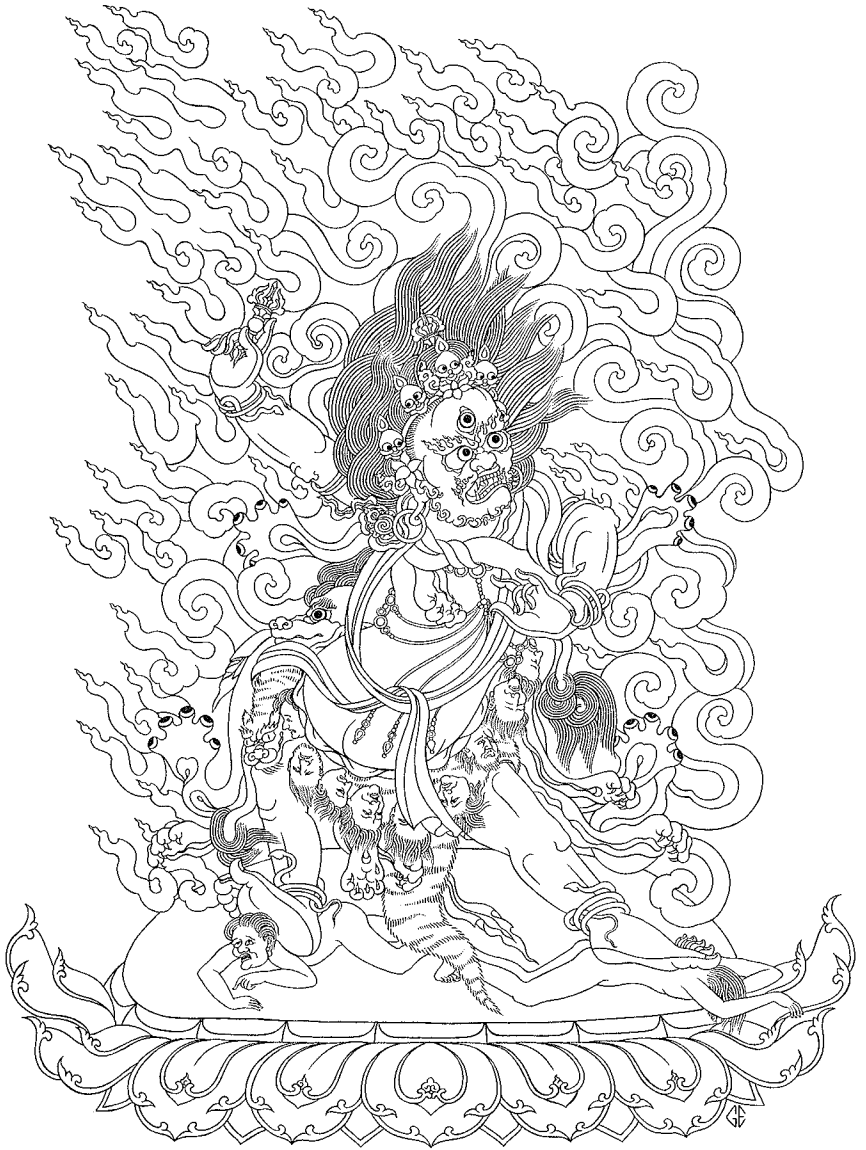
Such practice is necessary generally because our thinking pattern, our conceptualized way of conducting our life in the world, is either too manipulative, imposing itself upon the world, or else runs completely wild and uncontrolled. Therefore, our meditation practice must begin with ego's outermost layer, the discursive thoughts which continually run through our minds, our mental gossip. The Lords use discursive thought as their first line of defense, as the pawns in their effort to deceive us. The more we generate thoughts, the busier we are mentally and the more convinced we are of our existence. So the Lords are constantly trying to activate these thoughts, trying to create a constant overlapping of thoughts so that nothing can be seen beyond them. In true meditation there is no ambition to stir up thoughts, nor is there an ambition to suppress them. They are just allowed to occur spontaneously and become an expression of basic sanity. They become the expression of the precision and the clarity of the awakened state of mind.

If the strategy of continually creating overlapping thoughts is penetrated, then the Lords stir up emotions to distract us.

The exciting, colorful, dramatic quality of the emotions captures our attention as if we were watching an absorbing film show. In the practice of meditation we neither encourage emotions nor repress them. By seeing them clearly, by allowing them to be as they are, we no longer permit them to serve as a means of entertaining and distracting us. Thus they become the inexhaustible energy which fulfills egoless action.

In the absence of thoughts and emotions the Lords bring up a still more powerful weapon, concepts. Labeling phenomena creates a feeling of a solid definite world of "things." Such a solid world reassures us that we are a solid, continuous thing as well. The world exists, therefore I, the perceiver of the world, exist. Meditation involves seeing the transparency of concepts, so that labeling no longer serves as a way of solidifying our world and our image of self. Labeling becomes simply the act of discrimination. The Lords have still further defense mechanisms, but it would be too complicated to discuss them in this context.

By the examination of his own thoughts, emotions, concepts and the other activities of mind, the Buddha discovered that there is no need to struggle to prove our existence, that we need not be subject to the rule of the Three Lords of Materialism. There is no need to struggle to be free; the absence of struggle is in itself freedom. This egoless state is the attainment of Buddhahood. The process of transforming the material of mind from expressions of ego's ambition into expressions of basic sanity and enlightenment through the practice of meditation—this might be said to be the true spiritual path.



# Spiritual Materialism

We have come here to learn about spirituality. I trust the genuine quality of this search but we must question its nature. The problem is that ego can convert anything to its own use, even spirituality. Ego is constantly attempting to acquire and apply the teachings of spirituality for its own benefit. The teachings are treated as an external thing, external to “me,” a philosophy which we try to imitate. We do not actually want to identify with or become the teachings. So if our teacher speaks of renunciation of ego, we attempt to mimic renunciation of ego. We go through the motions, make the appropriate gestures, but we really do not want to sacrifice any part of our way of life. We become skillful actors, and while playing deaf and dumb to the real meaning of the teachings, we find some comfort in pretending to follow the path.

Whenever we begin to feel any discrepancy or conflict between our actions and the teachings, we immediately interpret the situation in such a way that the conflict is smoothed over. The interpreter is ego in the role of spiritual advisor. The situation is like that of a country where church and state are separate. If the policy of the state is foreign to the teachings of the church, then the automatic reaction of the king is to go to the head of the church, his spiritual advisor, and ask his

blessing. The head of the church then works out some justification and gives the policy his blessing under the pretense that the king is the protector of the faith. In an individual's mind, it works out very neatly that way, ego being both king and head of the church.

This rationalization of the spiritual path and one's actions must be cut through if true spirituality is to be realized. However, such rationalizing is not easy to deal with because everything is seen through the filter of ego's philosophy and logic, making all appear neat, precise and very logical. We attempt to find a self-justifying answer for every question. In order to reassure ourselves, we work to fit into our intellectual scheme every aspect of our lives which might be confusing. And our effort is so serious and solemn, so straight-forward and sincere, that it is difficult to be suspicious of it. We always trust the "integrity" of our spiritual advisor.

It does not matter what we use to achieve self-justification: the wisdom of sacred books, diagrams or charts, mathematical calculations, esoteric formulae, fundamentalist religion, depth psychology, or any other mechanism. Whenever we begin to evaluate, deciding that we should or should not do this or that, then we have already associated our practice or our knowledge with categories, one pitted against the other, and that is spiritual materialism, the false spirituality of our spiritual advisor. Whenever we have a dualistic notion such as, "I am doing this because I want to achieve a particular state of consciousness, a particular state of being," then automatically we separate ourselves from the reality of what we are.

If we ask ourselves, "What is wrong with evaluating, with taking sides?", the answer is that, when we formulate a secondary judgment, "I should be doing this and should avoid doing that," then we have achieved a level of complication which

takes us a long way from the basic simplicity of what we are. The simplicity of meditation means just experiencing the ape instinct of ego. If anything more than this is laid onto our psychology, then it becomes a very heavy, thick mask, a suit of armor.

It is important to see that the main point of any spiritual practice is to step out of the bureaucracy of ego. This means stepping out of ego's constant desire for a higher, more spiritual, more transcendental version of knowledge, religion, virtue, judgment, comfort or whatever it is that the particular ego is seeking. One must step out of spiritual materialism. If we do not step out of spiritual materialism, if we in fact practice it, then we may eventually find ourselves possessed of a huge collection of spiritual paths. We may feel these spiritual collections to be very precious. We have studied so much. We may have studied Western philosophy or Oriental philosophy, practiced yoga or perhaps have studied under dozens of great masters. We have achieved and we have learned. We believe that we have accumulated a hoard of knowledge. And yet, having gone through all this, there is still something to give up. It is extremely mysterious! How could this happen? Impossible! But unfortunately it is so. Our vast collections of knowledge and experience are just part of ego's display, part of the grandiose quality of ego. We display them to the world and, in so doing, reassure ourselves that we exist, safe and secure, as "spiritual" people.

But we have simply created a shop, an antique shop. We could be specializing in oriental antiques or medieval Christian antiques or antiques from some other civilization or time, but we are, nonetheless, running a shop. Before we filled our shop with so many things the room was beautiful: white-washed walls and a very simple floor with a bright lamp burn-

ing in the ceiling. There was one object of art in the middle of the room and it was beautiful. Everyone who came appreciated its beauty, including ourselves.

But we were not satisfied and we thought, “Since this one object makes my room so beautiful, if I get more antiques, my room will be even more beautiful.” So we began to collect, and the end result was chaos.

We searched the world over for beautiful objects—India, Japan, many different countries. And each time we found an antique, because we were dealing with only one object at a time, we saw it as beautiful and thought it would be beautiful in our shop. But when we brought the object home and put it there, it became just another addition to our junky collection. The beauty of the object did not radiate out any more, because it was surrounded by so many other beautiful things. It did not mean anything anymore. Instead of a room full of beautiful antiques we created a junk shop!

Proper shopping does not entail collecting a lot of information or beauty, but it involves fully appreciating each individual object. This is very important. If you really appreciate an object of beauty, then you completely identify with it and forget yourself. It is like seeing a very interesting, fascinating movie and forgetting that you are the audience. At that moment there is no world; your whole being is that scene of that movie. It is that kind of identification, complete involvement with one thing. Did we actually taste it and chew it and swallow it properly, that one object of beauty, that one spiritual teaching? Or did we merely regard it as a part of our vast and growing collection?

I place so much emphasis on this point because I know that all of us have come to the teachings and practice of meditation not to make a lot of money, but because we genuinely

want to learn, want to develop ourselves. But, if we regard knowledge as an antique, as “ancient wisdom” to be collected, then we are on the wrong path.

As far as the lineage of teachers is concerned, knowledge is not handed down like an antique. Rather, one teacher experiences the truth of the teachings, and he hands it down as inspiration to his student. That inspiration awakens the student, as his teacher was awakened before him. Then the student hands down the teachings to another student and so the process goes. The teachings are always up to date. They are not “ancient wisdom,” an old legend. The teachings are not passed along as information, handed down as a grandfather tells traditional folk tales to his grandchildren. It does not work that way. It is a real experience.

There is a saying in the Tibetan scriptures: “Knowledge must be burned, hammered and beaten like pure gold. Then one can wear it as an ornament.” So when you receive spiritual instruction from the hands of another, you do not take it uncritically, but you burn it, you hammer it, you beat it, until the bright, dignified color of gold appears. Then you craft it into an ornament, whatever design you like, and you put it on. Therefore, *dharma* is applicable to every age, to every person; it has a living quality. It is not enough to imitate your master or guru; you are not trying to become a replica of your teacher. The teachings are an individual personal experience, right down to the present holder of the doctrine.

Perhaps many of my readers are familiar with the stories of Naropa and Tilopa and Marpa and Milarepa and Gampopa and the other teachers of the Kagyü lineage. It was a living experience for them, and it is a living experience for the present holders of the lineage. Only the details of their life-situations are different. The teachings have the quality of warm,



fresh baked bread; the bread is still warm and hot and fresh. Each baker must apply the general knowledge of how to make bread to his particular dough and oven. Then he must personally experience the freshness of this bread and must cut it fresh and eat it warm. He must make the teachings his own and then must practice them. It is a very living process. There is no deception in terms of collecting knowledge. We must work with our individual experiences. When we become confused, we cannot turn back to our collection of knowledge and try to find some confirmation or consolation: "The teacher and the whole teaching is on my side." The spiritual path does not go that way. It is a lonely, individual path.

Q: Do you think spiritual materialism is a particularly American problem?

A: Whenever teachings come to a country from abroad, the problem of spiritual materialism is intensified. At the moment America is, without any doubt, fertile ground ready for the teachings. And because America is so fertile, seeking spirituality, it is possible for America to inspire charlatans. Charlatans would not choose to be charlatans unless they were inspired to do so. Otherwise, they would be bank robbers or bandits, inasmuch as they want to make money and become famous. Because America is looking so hard for spirituality, religion becomes an easy way to make money and achieve fame. So we see charlatans in the role of student, *chela*, as well as in the role of guru. I think America at this particular time is a very interesting ground.

Q: Have you accepted any spiritual master as a guru, any particular living spiritual master?

A: At present there is no one. I left my gurus and teachers