

## The Three Lords of Materialism<sup>1</sup>

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.

1) 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.

---

<sup>1</sup> Excerpt from the Introduction to *Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism* by Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche

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.

2) 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.

3) 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 seemingly 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."