

False Spiritual Economy: Why an “I Want it All and I Want it Now” Attitude doesn’t Promote Spiritual Growth



It is fair to say that in contemporary society there is a growing demand amongst consumers for instant gratification and for products and services that can be accessed 24-hours a day. This appears to be the case across numerous sectors of society including (but not limited to) business, education, retail, tourism, health, and recreation. Some examples that come to mind are the: (i) investor looking for a quick-win return on their outlay, (ii) patient demanding a same-day diagnosis and medicine for their latest ailment, (iii) fast-food restaurant goer, (iv) all-inclusive package holiday-maker that can have food, drink, and entertainment any time of day and without having to leave the confines of their hotel, (v) student or professional undertaking an accelerated program of studies or training in order to be awarded the qualification/certificate in the shortest time possible, and (vi) individual using an online dating agency in order to be instantly matched with the “perfect partner”. In addition to the sectors and examples mentioned above, this trend towards wanting immediate reward also appears to be occurring in the spirituality and religion marketplace. For example, one only has to conduct a search on the internet or look at the spirituality section of a bookshop and it is easy to be overwhelmed by the number of individuals purporting to be spiritual teachers and promising a quick-fix for alleviating suffering. In this post, we examine the benefits and risks of the ‘I want it all, I want it now’ mentality as they relate

to the spiritual (and high-street) consumer, and discuss whether it is possible to embody the essence of the Buddha's teachings whilst living in a "fast-food" society.

I Want it All, and I Want it Now

When we wish a change from listening to classical music, we sometimes like to listen to music by the rock band Queen. Any readers of this post that also like the music of Queen may recognise the words used in the above subheading from the band's song 'I Want it All' that featured on their 1989 album 'The Miracle'. We are not sure about the exact sentiments that Queen were attempting to convey with these words, but they accurately capture the essence of the consumer trend that we referred to above. We would like to be clear at this point that we are not asserting that 'wanting it all' and 'wanting it now' is necessarily a bad thing. Indeed, when talking about the materialistic world, there are certainly circumstances where the quick-win option represents the most rational way to proceed and makes the various tasks and challenges that we have to cope with in life much more manageable. For example, there is absolutely no sense in waiting for days, months, or years for an equivalent product or service that can be installed or delivered the same day. Likewise, if an investor can buy stock or currency on Monday and sell it on Friday for £100,000s profit, then this is obviously much less strenuous than working 40-hours a week for years-on-end in order to make the same amount of money. It could be argued that there are benefits (e.g., personal growth, increase in resilience and coping skills, etc.) associated with having to work hard or wait a long time for a reward, but the appeal of being able to instantly 'have it all' cannot be denied.

Although there are occasions in everyday life where the ‘I want it all and I want it now’ approach represents an acceptable if not skilful way to proceed, unfortunately, there are rarely ever any instances where this approach results in a meaningful reward when it comes to spiritual practice. This is certainly not to say that some spiritual paths are not more expedient than others, but the rate at which a person progresses spirituality is generally a function of how much effort they are willing to make (as well as other factors such as (i) the skill of their teacher, (ii) their underlying propensity for spiritual growth [i.e., their “karmic history”], and (iii) the environmental and materialistic conditions in which they find themselves). Therefore, in general, if a person wishes to spiritually progress at rate x , then they have to make the equivalent amount of effort. However, if they wish to progress at the faster rate of y , then they have to operate a little bit more outside of their comfort zone and up their efforts accordingly. As we discussed in our post on ‘The Top Ten Mistakes made by Buddhist Meditation Practitioners’, it is important to remember that upping one’s effort in the context of spiritual practice doesn’t mean taking things to extremes, but means being more willing to surrender one’s ego.

Consequently, given that the old adage ‘you get out what you put in’ certainly applies to spiritual practice, any technique or person promising rapid spiritual progress and/or insights needs to be approached with caution. The reason for us making this assertion relates closely to the content of our recent post on suffering where we referred to the fact that the average person has become so adept at acting selfishly and has amassed so much negativity, they must first learn how to become fully aware of and work with their suffering before they can transmute it. In other words, most people are so entrenched in their own self-created suffering that they are oblivious to its severity, and it is only when they start to practice meditation and/or become more spiritually aware they begin to fully appreciate the extent of their suffering.

In previous posts we have made reference to the Law of Causality that governs the behaviour of all phenomena and is a fundamental principle of both Buddhist philosophy and modern science. Like everything else, suffering is the effect of a cause. According to Buddhist theory, the causes of suffering are unwholesome mental states – particularly greed/desire (i.e., attachment), hatred (i.e., aversion), and harbouring deluded views more generally. Based on the Law of Causality, Buddhism asserts that if a person wishes their suffering to go away, then they have to undo or remove the causes that first made that suffering appear. This is nothing more than common sense, and since those causes (i.e., greed, hatred, delusion) have been “practised” and present for a long period of time (innumerable lifetimes according to the Buddhist view), then it is also common sense that removing those causes is not something that can be done overnight. The Buddha taught that the only way to remove the underlying causes of suffering is to practise and cultivate their opposites (i.e., non-attachment, non-aversion, and wisdom) by embracing an authentic spiritual path and by eventually uprooting even the slightest belief in an inherently-existing self.

I Already Have it All, and I Already Have it Now

In the above discussion, we have made it clear that the ‘I want it all and I want it now’ attitude is not compatible with lasting spiritual growth. However, only the slightest shift in attitude is required in order to find ourselves in a position where we can embrace the very essence of the Buddha’s teachings, whilst at the same time fully savour – to an indescribable extent – all that life has to offer (including “fast-food” products and services). The way to do this is not to want or desire to have it all, but to perfect the practice of understanding that we already have it all. Wanting it all creates a separation between ourselves and the ‘all’ that we are striving to acquire. In the context of Buddhist practice, for as long as we see spiritual liberation as a goal – we will never achieve it. We have

previously discussed this principle using the example of the wave that needlessly suffers because it believes it is separate from the ocean. However, as soon as the wave gets over itself and relaxes into its natural state, it once again becomes the entire ocean. In other words, it is when we stop wanting it all, and stop wanting it now, that it becomes possible to find ourselves in the fortunate position of actually having it all, and having it now.

This shift in attitude and realisation that we already have everything we need may appear to contradict the foregoing discussion relating to the fact that suffering is causal and that there is no easy or quick means of “undoing” or transforming suffering. However, there is no contradiction here because by perfecting the practice of not wanting to be somewhere else, have something else, do something else, or be someone else, we are left with no alternative other than to just simply be. The practice and art of simply being just so happens to constitute a very expedient path for uprooting the causes of suffering. The reason for this is because when we practice simply being and savour, but don't cling to, every single drop of experience that flows through our consciousness, we actually move beyond the realm and confines of causality. In this mode of perceiving, spiritual growth can happen very fast and in some cases even at lightning speed. The reason it can happen so quickly is because we are absolutely unattached to the idea of making spiritual progress or of becoming enlightened.

By practising simply being, we create the causes and satisfy the conditions for giving rise to the profound spiritual realisation that causality is an implausible construct. As we have already outlined, modern science and (the preparatory stages of) Buddhist practice are based on the assumption that the entire universe (or multiverse if you prefer) is governed by the law of cause and effect. However, let us consider for a moment exactly what is meant and implied by this law. The law of causality asserts that any given phenomenon manifests in reliance upon a single or multiple causes. Despite this, in truth, no single cause produces a given effect. In fact, it is actually impossible to quantify the exact number and

types of causes that give rise to a particular outcome. For example, it might be argued that the cause of a person having to rush to the toilet to urinate was them drinking a large volume of water. But you cannot leave it there because an infinite number of other causes also play their part. Assuming the water came in a glass, then the existence of the glass may not be discounted as a factor that facilitated the subsequent occurrence of the individual dashing to the loo. The same applies to the existence of the clouds and rain that produced the water, the oceans and rivers that produced the clouds, and the 'pee' from countless other individuals that played a small but significant part in helping to fill up the oceans. Likewise, the existence of the water processing factory and its employees must also be taken into account. Other contributing factors include (for example) the fact that the toilet-going individual had a body (they wouldn't have been able to drink water without one), their parents that brought them into the world, the grandparents that created their parents, and so forth. In fact, believe it or not, every single atom that exists in the entire universe, and every single instant of time that has unfolded since even before the universe existed, are in some way causal factors in the act of the individual dashing to the bathroom.

Since all of the causes that give rise to a particular effect can never be fully quantified, the plausibility of causality must be called into question. In other words, phenomena are interconnected to the extent that they cannot be separated into discrete entities. In essence, there is only oneness and everything is ultimately of the same taste. Phenomena arise from oneness, they are the nature of oneness, and they dissolve back into oneness. The law of causality begins to break down when cause and effect happen to be one and the same thing, because essentially there is no longer a causal relationship. Therefore, since oneness gives rise to oneness, how can it be said that phenomena manifest in reliance on causes?

What this means in the context of the current discussion is that the approach we advocated earlier of not ‘wanting it all and wanting it now’ and of realising that one already ‘has it all’ does not just reflect the ramblings of two Buddhist monks that are also psychologists, but it actually represents the fundamental truth of reality. Whenever you breathe in, you breathe in the entirety of space and time. You are the very fabric of the universe, you are the primordial purity and essence of existence, you are everything.

Ven Edo Shonin & Ven William Van Gordon

Further Reading

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