

## On the Worry about “Not Having Lived”

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In spiritual circles, one hears everywhere these days a phrase that I think is very remarkable: "It would be so bad, if you at the end of your life would realize that you have not lived". This sentence is presented as if there was no doubt about its imperative accuracy, as if it were true as a matter of course. And immediately it provokes the reflex in the person who hears it to say, "Oh yes, wouldn't that be terrible? I need to check immediately where I myself have failed to live, just to avoid that this happens to me". Is it not strange what an effect such a statement can have on spiritual seekers, which is so utterly immature, so utterly meaningless, and so entirely without a spiritual basis? For what is actually "having lived"? When has one lived? And when not? And what does "it would be so bad" mean? Why would it be bad not to have lived? What would be so bad if my existence would never have taken place? Then I neither knew of myself, and could not regret my non-existence, nor any other limited being would mourn my missing birth. How many potentially beneficial births might never have taken place? Is not the world rather full of births from which we could have been spared?

Of course, I know that the statement does not mean life in the biological sense, but a very specific life. It refers to a life that "takes part in life", to use another suggestive phrase. This usually means that we use all the pleasures our society has to offer. Taking part in "life" means participating in pleasures – life and pleasures thus seem to be the same. So you go to the movies, at parties, or to the internet sex shop, you can buy any junk that our consumer world has to offer. Those who cannot do so due to lack of financial facilities will be left out in the cold: They cannot "participate in life", so they are actually dead. Life is equated with a particular form of life, which our society defines as the pleasant, the better life. Who is not savouring this pleasant, better life to the fullest is dead for society. They are dead because they do not appear as consumers within the internal customer ranking of banks and corporations. They are dead because they are not visible to others, the participants, the consumers, do not appear among them. They are also dead – and that is the aspect, in which pseudo-New-

Age is always so interested – because they do not feel the vitality of sensual enjoyment. And this vitality of the senses is why we live, isn't it?

Let us ask, if it is allowed, the Buddha and the Christ, what they think about it. The Buddha does not seem to have believed that the purpose of enjoyment should be the desirable goal of this life since his departure from his father's household. He seems to have had very different ideas of spirituality. On the first phase of asceticism, the second phase of the "middle way" follows, emphasising not to condemn the pleasurable life, but also not to look for it, but to be indifferent to it. In his view, a key aspect of the spiritual life is to get rid of greed. Greed occurs in us in gross material and very subtle facets, but in essence there are two recurring issues: It is the greed for material and sensual pleasures and the thirst for existence, for life, that bind us. Both bind us, so the experience of the Buddha, because they fetter us to this life and thus to the need to incarnate again and again. Interestingly enough, both components have been combined to the one big ideal of our society – a long and pleasurable life – appearing clearly in the equation of life and pleasure, as we have seen. Now you might say: If you do not have a problem with being incarnated again and again in this world, all is well and you do not have a problem with your greed. This is true, of course, the Buddha would say: Who does not realize that even an ever so pleasant life in this incarnation inevitably is full of suffering, may simply go on living like this. But this is not spirituality. For the Buddha, spirituality begins only at the point where someone discovers that this world contains suffering not only here and there, but that it is suffering in its depth, in its essence. The fact of blindness, not knowing what you and this world actually is (i.e., the separation from the Divine, as it is called in theistic religions) creates a condition of which we often are not aware: it separates us from the inexhaustible source of all happiness, which we really are. The worldly pleasures, on the other hand, only keep us from seeking this real one. They entangle us in wanting and disappointment, anger, hatred, if we do not get it. The interplay between desire and anger produces the entire psychological suffering on this planet. It is nothing but a farce if you believe you could escape this interplay by increasing the balance on the side of the wanting by doing everything possible to live well, or – to put it in the shortened suggestive formula: "to live fully". Of course, you can call these ideas a bit dated, as they are 2,500 years old. But then, we might as well throw the whole teaching of the Buddha on the trash heap of history, as the theory of the structure of suffering in desire is its core theme.

And Jesus of Nazareth? Has not Christianity always promoted the development of material well-being or at least the rich and their richness? Does not the Western capitalist-industrialized civilization owe Christianity its existence?

Well, the difference between Jesus of Nazareth and the sociological creature called Christianity is another issue. Jesus of Nazareth lived simply, but not ascetic, just like the Buddha. Not by total renunciation of the world, both taught with the example of their own life, but by the right living in it one wins the kingdom of God. But this right life is not blessed with material goods ("It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God"), but by devotion to God and reaching in us a permeability for Her love for all creation. This love for all creatures is difficult to bring in line with the idea of unlimited consumption. It is at least as long opposed to it, as long as not all benefit from the unlimited possibilities of sensual pleasures and as long as the community of plants and animals on this planet is threatened to collapse under our consumption. And even then, the kingdom of God is not of this world. It is of another, more subtle quality than what can be experienced in the gross material.

Now, one may say there were spiritual teachers who considered things differently. After all, there is Tantra, there are even older indigenous spiritualities of aboriginal peoples, in which everything is connected with everything and in which there can be no exclusion of sexuality, of joy, of pleasure from the spiritual realm. This is true and absolutely correct. But then, you have to say also that both in Tantra and in these cults, the primordial cults of humanity, the mundane is embedded in the spiritual and not vice versa. Collecting sweet fruits the Yanomami do for sensual pleasure, but in their integrated picture of the world this is an entirely spiritual act. They do not only collect fruits, they communicate at the same time with the gods of the fruits, with the Mother Earth, who offereth them these gifts. Everything happens because the ancestors descended from the gods, or were created by them, because they set it up that way, so everything happens in a spiritual order. Similarly, in Tantra: Tantra is not intended as an excuse for spiritual people to take a break from the spiritual exercise by having a party. Tantra means spiritual practice in every life situation, precisely in those where desire is sparked the most. Desire is converted in Tantra into spiritual energy, it is not an end in itself, quite the contrary, it is only desirable because it is useful in order to practice its own overcoming.

When I hear from someone the sentence: "It is important to have lived", then I think that this person does not practice spiritually. His or her idea of a spiritual practice seems to be mixed up with what our affluent society is teaching as its own "spirituality". There is one word for it: hedonism. You could also say "consumerism": the principle that I am happy when I experience as much sensory stimuli as possible, and that I have to spend money for this aim. If I do not, then

I live as if I were dead. And who – except most depressed people – wants to be dead? I personally consider this attitude for the product of an anti-spiritual, materialistic culture, for which there is nothing beyond the physically explorable realm. I regard this attitude as spiritual nonsense, a lie, a malicious deception. I do not believe that this form of life is what leads to happiness, but to attachment to an existence that wants to be overcome. Unless you found a cult of holy consumption, such as the intentionally unfunny impersonators of the "Church of Stop Shopping" did (or did not), a cult that meets on Saturday afternoons in the temples of the earth wide power, the major shopping malls and shopping paradises, for the holy spending spree, and that only has one great vision: a world of unlimited consumption, a world in which all people are provided with useless material goods and in which a miraculous pill expels all other suffering. Such a brave new world can be constructed. But it has nothing to do with a *spiritual* world. It is not the paradise, which all spiritual traditions always have recognized behind this physical reality, and which they have experienced. There is this other, subtle reality – that is their message, and by letting this sensuous world behind us, we enter into spheres in which true happiness is to be found. This world is only the outside of that. That is the message of the spiritual teachers. To find happiness in the sensual pleasures of this world is quite the opposite of spirituality.

Who is afraid of not having lived, when retiring to a monastery, a hermitage or simply in him- or herself, when living in (voluntary) poverty or simply abstaining from most of the so-called pleasures, apparently considers this form of existence as extremely important. S/he believes that this body and its pleasures are the most important thing to preserve. S/he therefore does not believe in an existence beyond this body, yet a happiness that is higher than the earthly one. S/he is afraid to give up the only thing that their mind and its earthly senses can view as desirable: the small, simple happiness of this life. For that person, "good" always means a material and sensual life. The life of a hermit or nun frightens them. This is probably the common state of most of the beings in this form of existence. It is a natural, self-evident reflex, because I know what I have (what my ego has). If I get my earthly reward, there is no fraud, because I can see what I get out. That exactly for the truly spiritual person is just the fraud, which our entire existence is based on.

It may be hard to accept, but who waters down the old traditions by introducing a "modern twist" and declares the sensual pleasures being part of the spiritual path for their own sake, will be guilty of turning the valuable messages of the spiritual paths into their contrary. He also is guilty against them who cannot be part of the brave new world of consumption, because they have to suffer

from poverty and hunger to the benefit of the consumption of others. Equating "life" with materialistic pleasure is a sarcastic mockery of those who are not even biologically able to live, because we want consume what they would deserve. There is also a suggestive message that could not be more diabolical to dissuade us from the spiritual path: consumption makes free and alive. I do not believe this cleverly placed advertising of an ideology that does not fight against what it hates, but infiltrates and finally incorporates it, as the Frankfurt school of social science already knew in the 1960s: Spirituality in our society is not – unlike in historical socialism – clumsily combated, the dominant economy avails itself even of this field actually opposed to it and breeds "spiritual consumer idiots" who believe it is a shame not to live well on the path to enlightenment. Well, it also does not help to live well. And – this is crucial – the so-called "good life" is not the path to enlightenment! The true good life is one that serves the spiritual progression alone. What pleasures it finds on the mundane level or does not find, simply does not matter. For Jesus of Nazareth as for the Buddha was neither pleasure nor its opposite, self-tormenting asceticism, the way they went themselves. It simply did not matter whether they had much or little fun in life. Fun is indifferent. Fun is replaced in the life of the spiritual seeker by the deep joy of union with the divine spirit. To pursue this relationship with God or the enlightened Mind is the goal and path of the spiritual quest alone. The assumption that the cosmic Spirit is manifested in the material does not turn the material into God.