

Chapter 9

Consciousness – The Gift of Materialism



It had been three days that they had been traveling. The three of them were the first human beings to leave the orbit of the earth. Three days traveling through emptiness, but they had the company of each other. Then, finally, on Christmas Eve, as their craft came around from the back side of the moon, they saw the earth in a new light. A simple photograph and their world and ours would never be the same. It had taken hundreds of years of technology, countless scientists, tremendous resources. All at once, the complexities and complications of life on earth now began to look very simple.

Before we become too critical of an object-based or materialistic worldview, we need to look at the consequences on a portion of humanity for having adopted such a view for an extended period of time. In recalling Chapter 6, the idea that the world is ultimately based on matter can be traced back at least 2,500 years, though this view began to have real prominence in Western culture with the dawn

of the scientific age after the Renaissance in the 17th century. If we look at the rise of the modern scientific view, we see also a rise of other qualities in humanity at that time. While it would be difficult to show a direct causal relationship between these elements, the reader is encouraged to consider the historical relevance of such a worldview, alongside various cultures, and even the development of individual human beings.

Historical Developments

Taken at face value, western science attempts to investigate the world without individual bias for or against any particular idea. It postulates that science itself may govern what is best and right for a given group of people. Previously, many aspects of society were overseen by specific individuals, who ideally held the best interest of others as their primary motivation. Often this was not the case, and these individuals would put their own particular self interest first, with little or no regard for the interests of others. From kings and queens, to landowners, to religious or tribal leaders, those that were supposed to be closest to the wisdom necessary for a peoples' survival were hopefully wise, compassionate, and mindful of the needs of others. When this wasn't the case, disagreements were often resolved by fighting. Then, as now, a wise person who could convey truthfulness to others was highly valued by the people at large.

Looking carefully at this earlier time, people identified themselves both as members of a group and as individual people. It is interesting to note that the first autobiography in European history did not come about until the dawn of the Renaissance, with *The Autobiography of Bevenuto Cellini*, begun in 1558. Before this time, few people had their image captured by a painting or, later, a photograph, while today most westerners have their first photograph taken within a few hours of birth. The modern western world is one where we are constantly reminded to claim our individuality (while simultaneously being encouraged to do so by purchasing some mass marketed product). Perhaps the clearest example of the increase in an individual's self-awareness is the development of 'freedom' in European and then American Culture. While previous cultures valued freedom, it has taken on a particularly interesting twist in America. Rather than freedom being a statement of a nation's ability to be free from outside oppression, in America it has become a symbol of: "I can do whatever I want; you can't take away MY freedom!"

Looking at other cultures today, many of them are aspiring toward this American expression of individual freedom. However, along with the striving for individuality often comes a longing for the cultural identity of the past. A casual look at traditional cultures and non-western ways of viewing the world shows greater value placed on working for the benefit of the group rather than the individual.

If we now follow the development of an individual person, we see a general movement from the family or group awareness of a young child, to a greater

desire for autonomy as an adolescent, to a certain level of self-reliance in adulthood. There are many exceptions to this general trend, but the tendency is clearly seen.

True adulthood in our present culture requires real individuality. Families no longer support each other as they did in the past, and many families are no longer represented as two parent models. Many young adults have not experienced a complete family unit growing up, and have never had an experience of real community. The individual is left more and more to fend for herself, or else rely on another who may or may not have her best interests at heart. The following case shows a trend happening in western cultures.

By the time midlife is reached, a crisis of identity and alienation often begins. People begin to feel cut off from the world, and as if no one else understands them. People and places that nourished them in the past no longer have the same influence; sense of place may have been replaced with a generic suburban culture. The individual begins to feel as if she is so separate from the rest of the world that absolutely no one understands her; and, that she has no understanding of the world around her. At this point a person has just become another casualty of a materialistic worldview. She sees herself as separate from everything, as a thing in itself. She has become so self-conscious that it is painful. At this moment, a choice is often made to become less conscious by drowning ones' awareness – whether through alcohol, drugs, habitually shopping, constant Internet use, nonstop work or physical workouts. Anything to make the sense of alienation go away.

Originally, humanity found its identity as an integral part of their surroundings. Later, human beings identified themselves as part of a local group, a tribe, a group of people connected to a specific place. Later, this was replaced in the west by a strong sense of individuality, and a caricature independence that has now often degenerated into alienation. However, with the sense of individuality comes a choice. Each individual is free to choose to go back to an earlier connected state of being, one that lacks independence. One can also choose to continue to move toward a greater separation with their surroundings resulting in an almost atomistic or disconnected relationship with their surroundings.

There is another option, and that is to choose to embrace the gift of materialism: the possibility for true self-awareness, out of which we can begin to connect back to the world *consciously*. If we choose this path and really connect back through our experiences and conceptual activity of the world, we slowly dissolve the habitual patterns of thought that we inherited from our materially based worldview; we reconnect to the world in a new manner.

Finally, one can choose to take the freedom and self-reliance of individual independence and, using this self-awareness to reconnect with the world, begin to modify its present manifestation towards self gain as well as for the greater good of the world. If we *really* take the exercises and thoughts of the previous chapters to heart, we find that we want to claim our own truly free independence, and that an interdependent worldview is just as much a reality. The gift of materialism is not only self-conscious independence; it also allows us to take this self-consciousness and put its thinking power to bear on our self/world split. Out of this we find that self and world are so related that they arise dependently on each other. It is at this point that we have unified the best of the West with the wisdom of the East. From a materialistic worldview we are able to claim self-consciousness, and out of the wisdom of the East (and many other indigenous people), a worldview that has interdependence at its core. In this merging, we find that the reality of a dependent worldview is not in contradiction to individual freedom. Instead, it may be perhaps the most noble and world changing possibility to which freedom can be applied. At this point in human development we become not only world changers but also world creators. The question that remains is, "What type of world will you be creating?"

This gift of materialism, the possibility of choice, takes on a tremendous responsibility. What will you choose to do today, what will you choose not to do?

This question needs to be answered freely by every human being. A few possibilities to look at this question freely are explored in the short chapters that follow. The intention is not to prescribe a fixed future forward, but to simply assist the reader in thinking in new ways, finding those elements of the world that are personally most important, and seeing what elements one chooses to bring into the world. It is time to let the materialistic worldview slowly transform into something new.