



Consuming Material Goods An Activist's First Step: Stop Passively

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In the first “valley” you’ll travel through on your way to a meaningful, hopeful life engaging with the world, you’ll encounter a fire-breathing dragon: materialism.

This first valley will seem familiar because it resembles the world we live in. However, the people in this valley are blind, even though they have eyes; theirs is a blindness of the intellect and of the spirit. They are wandering in the desert, chasing mirages.

They see wonderful visions of material happiness. In order to be happy, they feel they must buy the latest electronic gadget, or apparel that everyone must wear to be seen as part of the group, or music that affirms their identity, or the right car, house or lifestyle. Yet, once in hand, the mirage vanishes; there is always an even newer gadget, or style, or song, or property beckoning out there, offering even greater satisfaction and calling “buy me, buy me, buy me.”

This valley traps most people as passive consumers of material goods. They keep the economy growing and feed ever-increasing wealth to the giant corporations that rule it. One cause of this blindness—these people see only the material dimension of life and seek satisfaction only in hedonistic pleasures.

A second cause of that materialistic blindness comes from tunnel vision—perceiving only a small part of the whole, determined by one’s field of knowledge, professional training or experience in life.

An economist sees only economics and filters everything to fit into that field of vision. A political activist will see only what reinforces her or his ideology and sees everything else as a threat. A religious person may be immersed in his or her own tradition and belief and completely ignores the richness of spiritual discovery in other faiths or denominations. A scientist may be convinced that anything not validated by the tools of her or his discipline or published in a peer-reviewed journal is not worthy of attention. Such tunnels become traps that do not provide any way out of this valley.

The blindness of the intellect rejects science and knowledge when it seems inconvenient. For those who are blind as such, truth is whatever you want it to be and has no relation to any objective reality. For the spiritually blind the ends—usually power or money—justify any means.

This anti-intellectual blindness can be very calculating, dishonestly and selectively using the tools of science for its own ends. It can also be very popular, because seeing everything in black and white, with the illusion of absolute certainty, brings comfort.

Blindness of the spirit shares many of these characteristics, but it denies any spiritual reality and views humanity only as animals with physical needs and desires that can be satisfied with carnal pleasures and material wealth. It denies any higher human purpose or meaning, and sees our existence only as the result of random processes. The Baha'i teachings ask everyone to reduce that blindness:

We cherish the hope that through the loving-kindness of the All-Wise, the All-Knowing, obscuring dust may be dispelled and the power of perception enhanced, that the people may discover the purpose for which they have been called into being. In this Day whatsoever serveth to reduce blindness and to increase vision is worthy of consideration. – Baha'u'llah, *Tablets of Baha'u'llah*, p. 35.

Science and history both show that every human being has a fundamental need and desire for meaning in life, a search for the self and the universe, with connections that give life a purpose. Spirituality, in this sense, refers to the natural and universal need to understand the world and our place in it. This spirituality can take many forms: secular or religious, in nature and the sciences, in art, music and poetry. When a person has no sense of meaning, or rejects this need for meaning, the vacuum in their existence leaves a fundamental anxiety too easily compensated by aggression, depression and addiction, or the overconsumption of material goods. These symptoms, in fact, define this desert of blind souls:

Observe how darkness has overspread the world. In every corner of the earth there is strife, discord and warfare of some kind. Mankind is submerged in the sea of materialism and occupied with the affairs of this world. They have no thought beyond earthly possessions and manifest no desire save the passions of this fleeting, mortal existence. – Abdu'l-Baha, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 335.

This blindness of the spirit becomes most evident in the automatic rejection of anything that might fall within what has traditionally been called God or religion. Yet religion forms the social, institutional response to the human need for spirituality; it meets a natural and universal human requirement. This is not to ignore that many of the worst atrocities we can imagine have taken place in the name of religion—but has religion not been used in such cases as a mere cover for baser human motivations?

To overcome any sense of spiritual blindness we need to look objectively at religion, not as something inevitably anti-scientific and anti-reason—as it too often is in the religious traditions of today—but as a potential force for good. Religion, the Baha'i teachings assert, can stand for unity rather than division, and be in harmony with science and reason, while providing answers to questions of human purpose, meaning and motivation:

In truth, religion is a radiant light and an impregnable stronghold for the protection and welfare of the peoples of the world, for the fear of God impelleth man to hold fast to that which is good, and shun all evil. Should the lamp of religion be obscured, chaos and confusion will ensue, and

the lights of fairness and justice, of tranquillity and peace cease to shine. – Baha'u'llah, *Tablets of Baha'u'llah*, p. 125.

Within this framework you will encounter religion and spirituality along this journey, freed from the trappings of the past and able to play a constructive role in transforming civilization. If you have an *a priori* prejudice against religion, try to set it aside for the duration of this journey. You can always return to it later.