

The Dirt Hypothesis

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When I think of the role that dirt plays in our lives, I am reminded of a particular Barney Miller episode, one in which a serious polyphobic (afraid of many things – in this case, environmental pollution in particular) was taken into custody. He had spent the last few years of his life compulsively making his apartment a haven of cleanliness until at last he dared not exit its confines. The horror that this man demonstrated at being locked in a jail cell was only followed by his rapid deterioration over the course of the episode. He was dead before the show was over.

This story does not sit well for many, particularly those of us on a spiritual path, for it suggests that the quest for purity can come at a price, yet such discomfort suggests that it holds a lesson for us seekers of Truth – a lesson which I describe as The Dirt Hypothesis.

Dirt is by nature dirty. Dirt can here be interpreted to mean garden soil, pollution, toxic emotion, negative attitude, vice, etc. “Dirty” individuals are generally considered the antithesis of virtuous ones. When are told that “Cleanliness is next to Godliness” and that “The body is a temple”, it follows that the more we purify our lifestyle in terms of diet, behavior, environment and even thoughts, the more we prepare our life as a vehicle of Spirit. As *A Search For God*, informs us:

What shall we do with this holy temple, this body? Purify it, glorify it, that it may be of priceless value when it is returned to its maker.

What then defiles the body that we should aim to purify it? Jesus offered the following for perspective:

Do not ye yet understand, that whatsoever entereth in at the mouth goeth into the belly, and as cast out into the draught? But those things which proceed out of the mouth come forth from the heart; and they defile the man.¹

These views, along those expressed by myriad greats from the ranks of Western and Eastern mysticism, direct us to cultivate virtue, even in and even despite the context of physical experience. As Krishna said to his disciple Arjuna,

¹ Matthew 15:17-18

He is the true renunciant and also the true yogi who performs dutiful and spiritual actions without desiring their fruits...²

To this effect Jesus added with emphasis,

Therefore Take no thought, saying What shall we eat? Or, What shall we drink? Or, Wherewithal shall we be clothed? For your heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need of all these things. But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you.³

Hence are we called by the great spiritual masters to renounce the materialistic ways of the world in our cultivation of spiritual virtue. Along with love and forgiveness, we come to view acceptance as a virtue and strive for non-attachment in all experience. The more we practice acceptance, the more we recognize just how much suffering is generated out of our attachments within the ever-changing dynamics of Creation. We understand more the teachings of Buddha, “Freedom is freedom from desire”, and of Christ, “How hard is it for them that trust in riches to enter into the kingdom of God!”⁴ In our pursuit of non-attachment, how easy it is to develop aversion toward all things worldly – to view earthly experience as a threat to Self-actualization.

In the context of aversion, life can become a continual purgation process – to rid temptations from our lives, to eliminate vice from our behavior, to wipe out filth from our thoughts, to cast out all poisons from our diet and environment, to evacuate all waste out of our sinuses and colon, and so on. While such aspirations would seem lofty, they are in themselves rather limiting, particularly in the context of aversion.

Speaking of aversion, I recall my employment at a health food store. Here one could buy a great variety of foods touting their purity and wholesomeness: “vegetarian”, “gluten-free”, “naturally sweetened”, “non-pasteurized”, “No sulfites”, etc. Yet how often I spotted customers scouring over the labels with scowls of dissatisfaction, as if no combination of ingredients could live up to their high standards. It wasn’t as if these customers were retarded. If anything they seemed to exhibit above-average intelligence and were no doubt well read in the multitude of theories with regards to what constitutes health food and what by-products of food processing compromise health. I could only picture these health food addicts eating their ultra pure diet with clothes pins on their noses while just down the road Joe Six-pack and his buddies were getting the most out of their fat-burgers with bacon and cheese. Who was doing themselves greater disservice?

Having been down both check-out lines, I could certainly make an argument either way, yet the answer lies somewhere in between (or rather within). Having explored a variety

² Bhagavad Gita 6:1

³ Matthew 6:31-33

⁴ Mark 10:24

of health food diets from vegan to ayurvedic, I can definitely attest to the prominent role diet can play in both the pursuit of physical and spiritual well-being. Of course, the eventuality of most dietary regimens that I have followed has been illness (which is to say, I got sick), yet when I abandoned their strict prescriptions and simply paid attention to how my body reacted to the foods, I found that more and more my body preferred natural, wholesome foods – both in terms of feeling and flavor. And so through simple mindfulness (and a bit of simple-mindedness) my diet gradually shifted to one that was relatively extreme in the eyes of my peers and family – so much so that it became difficult to ever again experience the simple joys of holiday feasts. Not only did the thought of eating green beans cooked with ham fat repulse me, I could see that my pickiness was offensive to others. Somewhere in the development of my healthy lifestyle I had lost something precious. I had forgotten the lesson of dirt.

Dirt, you see, is a great teacher. Our bodies are made from the “dust” after all, so it is reasonable to conclude that the body and mind are built to deal with it – which is to say that out of survival instinct we are oriented to adapt to challenge. When we inhale dust, we cough. When we sniff pepper, we sneeze. And when we take away a challenging stimulus, our body-mind tends to look for more subtle ones.

Think about this in regards to allergies. Allergy is the body’s reaction to an antigen (a foreign protein marker) whose source is considered to be a threat. The purpose of this reaction is to purge or deactivate the foreign “not-self” from the system. Research indicates that children raised on farms or with pets have far fewer allergies than children whose antigenicity develops with only limited exposure to animals. What this suggests is that when our immune system is challenged enough (at the right age), it no longer concerns itself with a little mold here or a little pollen there. In contrast, when we strive for the type of un-natural cleanliness (which is impossible to achieve with animals around) that characterizes this age of disinfective soaps and indoor living, we deprive the immune system of hefty stimulation, and so it focuses its reactions upon the substances available, no matter how infinitesimal in quantity. The dirt hypothesis essentially amounts to this - **the less dirt we have to deal with, the more we tend to react to it.**

Now think of this “dirt hypothesis” with regards to cultivating virtue. When striving to accept Creation “as it is” with non-attachment to how it may seem, the world with all its attachments can seem “dirty”, as if its presence in our life somehow soils our path. Yet when we focus on the “dirt” in our life, even as we wash it away, we become increasingly aware and generally more intolerant of that uncleanliness still present. Our inevitable reaction essentially amounts to a spiritual allergy in which we unleash the full fury of the subconscious mind against the identification processes perceived to be “not Self” and hence threatening. Needless to say for anyone who experiences allergic symptoms, such spiritual allergy is a context for un-ending suffering unless appropriate intervention is made.

As paradoxical as it may seem, aversion is but the shadow of attachment. While attachment is the process of identifying with some object in hopes that it never change, aversion is the process of alienating some part of Creation, Nature, God and essentially of

Self, (“for in all ways self meets self”⁵) in a futile attempt to prevent it from changing us - which amounts to a threatened sense of self. We see then that unless we address our aversions, we will be ever reactive to Self. The healing process would seem to involve getting our hands dirty. This is precisely what the great spiritual masters had in mind all along – to love and serve despite apparent obstacles and needs and often in apparent defiance to the prescribed spiritual regimens of the day. In such light the body becomes a living sacrifice to the Living God of Creation.

This is not to justify, in the least, behavior which tends to befoul the body, that temple in which we find ourselves. This is rather a call to balance – a balance which allows us to partake in the apparent “ups” and “downs” of physical experience without getting caught up in them or hung up by them. To be sure, in a relative sense, the ways of the world are way out of balance and hardly an exemplification of acceptance. Most of us would benefit health-wise from thoughtful maintenance of the body. The cleaner and quieter the temple, the easier it is to recognize that God is with us. By all means purge away! Alkalinize the system! Abstain from vice and sin no more! Yet let us not lose sight of the whole point of keeping the temple clean in terms so black and white as “good” and “evil”. The masters say that we’re here to help one another, and in this I firmly agree. While cigarettes and red meat no doubt challenge the body, particularly when partaken in large amounts, such challenges in smaller portions probably serve constructive roles in terms of the full range of experiences through which we can interact with our fellow brothers and sisters. The more we participate in the world with a positive frame of mind, the less we fixate on the negative, no matter how dirty our hands get. As far as I can tell, this is the only way to transcend the dirt hypothesis. As messy a business as compassion can appear to be, it is the means by which we spiritualize the temple, and in a transpersonal sense that amounts to a clean bill of health.

⁵ A Search For God