

# FROM DEPRESSION TO SELF REALISATION

## A WIDER VIEW - BY TONY DEVANEY

Exploring the cultural determinants of depression In a Channel 4 television documentary in 1999, called *'New Britain on the Couch'*, the psychologist Oliver James observed, " The thing that puzzles me is that with all this freedom and affluence, the happiness bit hasn't come about.' He commented that the Government was doing nothing to address our psychological well-being and in fact 'they might be making things worse.'

He went on to pose the question as to whether consumer culture was poisoning our minds via the media, causing us to compare ourselves with others and to feel a sense of failure - a manufacturing of depression. One of the participants interviewed in the documentary said, "I have achieved all my goals. This is as good as it gets, and I hate it."

It is the continued denial and repression of suffering and its underlying causes that keeps us from experiencing true happiness. The principles of utilitarianism and free market economics provide us with only shallow and illusory choices and fleeting satisfactions that keep us emotionally enslaved and unfree. The more intense and successful our efforts on a purely social level, the greater may be our failure to connect with our essential Self and our true 'spiritual homeland.'

In his book, 'The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying', Sogyal Rinpoche, one of the foremost interpreters of Tibetan Buddhism to the West comments: 'Modern society seems to me a celebration of all the things that lead away from the truth, make truth hard to live for, and discourage people from even believing that it exists. And to think that all this springs from a civilisation which claims to adore life, but actually starves it of real meaning; that endlessly speaks of making people happy, but in fact blocks their way to the source of real joy. This modern Samsara feeds off an anxiety and depression that it fosters and trains us all in, and carefully nurtures with a consumer machine that needs to keep us greedy to keep us going.' (*The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying, 2002, Rider*)

The prolonged periods of emotional suffering and difficulty in my own life cannot be separated now from the moments of unbounded joy and spiritual Insight. They are inextricably bound together in the growing experience of real freedom. This is expressed in my short verse 'Earthly Years'.

### EARTHLY YEARS

A need to fail, a will to win,  
To find the truth is to begin.  
Each moment glows as it appears,  
To light the way through earthly years,  
When constructs change  
And don't belong,  
And life is an eternal Song

As Sogyal Rinpoche points out in a further passage from his book, the need to look both within and around ourselves for answers in life is no easy option:

'We are terrified to look inward, because our culture has given us no idea of what we will find. We may even think that if we do we will be in danger of madness. So, we make our lives so hectic that we eliminate the slightest risk of looking into ourselves. Sometimes I think that we don't want to ask any real questions about who we are, for fear of discovering that there is some other reality than this one. What would this discovery make of how we have lived? How would our friends and colleagues react to what we now know? What would we do with the new knowledge? With knowledge comes responsibility. Sometimes even when the cell door is flung open, the prisoner chooses not to escape.'

Adverse psychological reactions to individual spiritual awakening are often viewed in western society as resulting from mental illness, and as requiring medication, rather than as a 'spiritual emergency' needing a climate of wider understanding and support.

Individual authenticity and respect for spiritual experience are both generally lacking in our society. They have been eroded and replaced by the advent of technology and commercial branding, mass entertainment and the cult of celebrity. I recently heard on the radio about a marketing ploy in America that has now also reached Britain, where product placing is carried out via paid actors and actresses posing as ordinary citizens in places of leisure. The radio presenter's suggestion that soon we won't know what is real life and what isn't anymore, comes a little late. Such an infiltration into our most free and relaxed moments is an extension of an already unreal culture.

Media led branding and rampant consumerism, coupled with a denial of any real privacy or individuality, are all facts of life now. What passes for individual expression is all too often simply the repeating of conventional received wisdom and rehearsing of impoverished social norms. Those who express real dissent and attempt to counter this inexorable trend are often stereotyped by the establishment as 'the enemy within', dangerous or ill-informed protesters, or social misfits.

My poem, '*Necessary Freedoms*' (Sub-titled 'House of Straw'), 1996, comments on the situation:

#### NECESSARY FREEDOMS

You may assault my senses with a stream of  
trivia, that's entertainment and information.  
You may bombard my home with junk mail  
and offers of freedom through consumption.  
That's enterprise and the free market.

You may legislate my every action,  
teach me the skills of being less than human,  
monitor my unguarded moments with  
video cameras and computer programmes.  
That's progress and protection.

But let me make this clear. I will not tolerate those 'squeegee merchants' with their blatant attempts to stir the cobwebs of my conscience, to cleanse the windscreen of my perception, That's anarchy and violence. We must put a stop to that!

(The Home Secretary, Jack Straw, had condemned the cleaning of car windscreens by unemployed 'squeegee merchants' among stationary traffic, as being an anti-social act.)

## **QUESTIONING OUR LIFESTYLE**

It seems that our Education system is only concerned with academic targets and social conditioning, rather than with any real questioning, or wider human development. Psychology is being used as an instrument of social coercion and measurement according to fixed norms, rather than as an aid to self-discovery and realisation of a more complete and fulfilling sense of identity.

Those of us who have had to face the consequences of direct or hidden violence and abuse from family or society, and who are struggling to overcome its effects on their psyche and emotional well-being, are often viewed as being constitutionally weak or having a pre-disposition to mental illness. Few can find the inner-strength to resist the pathologising of their problems. Many become victims of society's continued social repression, undergoing treatment to help them maintain a narrow but 'normal' view of life and adherence to the status quo.

In the radio programme, 'A Point of View: Justifying culture', BBC Radio 4. 7 January 2011, the philosopher Alain de Botton commented on cuts in the education system. He said, 'Arts subjects are being cut because those who teach them are not saying why they matter.' He went on to say:

'We have implicitly charged our higher-education system with a dual and possibly contradictory mission, to teach us how to make a living and to teach us how to live. And we have left the second of these two aims recklessly vague and unattended.

How should universities be rearranged? In my view, departments should be required to identify the problematic areas in people's lives and to design courses that address them head on. Notions of assistance and transformation which presently hover ghost-like over speeches at graduation ceremonies should be properly explored.

There should be classes in, among other topics, being alone, reconsidering work, improving relationships with children, reconnecting with nature and facing illness. A university alive to the true responsibilities of cultural artefacts within a secular age would establish a Department for Relationships, an Institute of Dying and a Centre for Self-Knowledge.'<sup>1</sup>

The idea that people are likely to really move on from their problems through prescribed drugs or cognitive and behavioural therapy, is questionable and naive. To become 'normal' again is all too often to remain part of the wider problem that will come back to haunt the individual and society.

In, *The Drama of being a Child - The search for the True Self*, (Virago Press Ltd.1995), the former psychotherapist and writer Alice Miller, explored the roots of repression in early childhood and its links with later individual and social violence. My early poem Earth (1977), below, expressed my own personal exploration and awareness of such factors.

There are no easy answers or remedies for our current situation. Followers of New Age spirituality and religious institutions alike, all often seem to fall into the same trap of collective thinking, denial of individual passion, suffering and vocation.

The psychological search for Self and an understanding of cultural and social influences can put us on the path to wider awareness, but we must also eventually move beyond these insights alone.

The required balance between the rights and duties of individual citizens can only ultimately be achieved within a more visionary social and cultural framework. It needs to be one that encourages and promotes a more authentic mode of personal and social development to reveal our true spiritual connectedness and interdependence, not just as an intellectual concept but as a lived experience!

We do not yet have such a social framework. One can only hope that it is slowly developing in subtle hidden ways through the thoughts and actions of more enlightened individuals in our world.

In the introduction to my own collection of poems, 'A Journey of the Soul', published in 1986, with a foreword by my spiritual advisor and professor of religious studies, I quoted Carl Jung's words:

' It is improbable that order will prevail against chaos and that meaning will win out over meaninglessness. Still the improbable happens, it is possible and not beyond our reach. In a very real sense the improbable is the true vocation, the authentic destiny of the human being. This is the vocation that can be said to make us human, for we are less than human in proportion as we dis-regard or ignore it. The trees and flowers, the birds and beasts who follow their destiny are superior to the human being who betrays his.'

I conclude with two of my early poems from the book:

#### FREE WILL

Man has free will, a flower just grows,  
The humble bee delights the rose.  
Each robin sings the livelong day,  
The field mouse frolics in the hay.  
What need have they of earthly clothes?  
Man has free will, a flower just grows.

(1982)

## EARTH

I have learned to live with  
the rock-bottom in myself,  
I have found the strength within me  
to climb slowly from the shelf.

I have learned that real living  
is more painful than I knew,  
I have sought the deeper meaning  
in ' To thine own self be true '.

I have uncovered a great deal  
to find the little that I know,  
but best of all, in striving  
I've discovered how to grow.

(1977)

Tony Devaney, Easter, 2011. (Edited and revised, December 2017)

(1) <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-12136511>