

Our Other Monkey Mind

By Petr Karel Ontl

In village India, so I am told, there are men who earn extra rupees by trapping monkeys to be sold as pets. Over the years, through trial and error, several ways have been devised to capture these primates, but the simplest method is said to be the monkey pot. In a clearing, the trapper fastens a short piece of cord or thin chain to a stake or tree-stump. To the other end he attaches a small pot, one with a rather narrow neck. Into this pot he drops several nuts, and scatters a few more on the ground nearby. He then goes a short distance away to wait out of sight.

Soon a band of monkeys arrives and descends to feed. Before long, one of them discovers the contents of the pot. He puts his hand in easily enough, but, having grasped the enticing snack, he cannot pull his clenched fist out through the narrow opening no matter how hard he struggles. In fear and panic the trapped monkey creates quite a ruckus, which brings the trapper running with net and cage. The monkey's fate, for all his cleverness, is sealed.

At first glance it would appear that the villager is the trapper, the baited pot his trap, and the poor monkey his victim. No doubt the villager sees things the same way, and the hapless simian, were he able to speak, would likely agree.

A closer look, however, shows a different perspective. The villager is not the trapper, nor the pot a trap, because there is nothing holding the monkey. He could very easily remove his hand from the pot and rejoin his kin in the freedom of the treetops if only he would let go of the nuts. If he would only let go!

The monkey in our anecdote does not suspect that he is being held prisoner solely by his mind. He has found some nuts. Greed — unreasonable and unreasoning desire — has arisen. Though the jungle abounds with fruits and nuts and all kinds of foods, his conditioned reaction dictates that he must have these as well. His narrow mindset is the only thing that imprisons him, that prevents him from letting go, from seeing the absurdity of his predicament as well as the obvious way out of it.

Now, before we make any smug comments about the monkey and his intelligence, or the apparent lack thereof, and before we congratulate ourselves on our vastly superior reasoning powers, let us see where we ourselves stand.

This business of letting go is so easy, and yet so hard, for monkey and for human being alike. We are both caught up in the same predicament. The details may be different, played out on higher levels of sophistication or complexity, but the end result is the same: enslavement by concepts and conditioning. While the monkey is done in by its greed for a few nuts, we humans are done in by our greed for wealth, fame, power, status, pleasure, and shiny trinkets and toys which we believe we absolutely must have, and cannot live without. Even more fundamentally, we become enslaved not so much by the material objects themselves, but by our attitudes and feelings toward them.

We endlessly seek gratification for the senses: pleasant things to look at, to listen to, to touch, to taste, to smell. And more: we are spurred on by thoughts or concepts created by our ego-driven minds. These last can be the hardest to satisfy

since we cannot just please our senses and be content. Rather, we strive to fulfill fantasies of outdoing our peers, of turning them green with envy by having the Biggest, the Costliest, the Latest, the Shiniest. We are always caught up in competition, in a game of one-upmanship.

It cannot even be said that we are materialistic: We don't know how to be! We don't genuinely enjoy and appreciate the material things we have, much less life itself. We don't even know how to relax. Aggressive competitiveness and acquisition become so obsessive, so compulsive, so ingrained, that everything we do, right down to the simplest recreational activity, is turned into a contest, a race, a struggle to outdo others, ourselves, a clock, or a calendar. Everything becomes a contest for money, trophies, prestige, or some other form of recognition.

The ironic part of all this is that while we are frantically making more money, getting a bigger house, and another pricey car, hoarding more and better playthings, and trying to impress the dickens out of the neighbors, we have less and less time to enjoy the very things we are slaving for. The tragic part is that in the same feverish process of acquisition of material things, we so very often lose our families, our health, our self-respect, and our peace of mind. Though we may rise to an ever higher and higher "standard of living," at the same time our society is falling apart before our very eyes. The prize is not what we expected, is it?

Are we really that different from that poor monkey? We do not know how or when to let go either. Or what to let go of. Who is to say that we are not even worse off than our little simian friend?

Craving is a normal, basic part of our conditioned nature. There are certain things

that are necessary for our physical survival and mental well-being, and others that are detrimental. The mind of every sentient being discriminates, putting these things into convenient categories, labeling them "good," "bad," and "indifferent" according to how it perceives them. And there are, of course, gradations within those categories.

According to the needs of the living organism, itself an extremely complex psycho-biological process, a complicated psycho-biological sub-process causes a desire to arise in the consciousness, alerting the organism to seek or avoid certain objects or conditions to ensure its proper functioning or survival. So far, so good. This is a necessary strategy evolved to maintain and protect the sentient being, be it man or microbe, as it goes about its business in the conditioned world.

When this survival mechanism gets out of hand, and instead of serving, takes over as master, it plunges us into a fog of cravings and longings. This vague, objectless wanting leaves us perpetually dissatisfied and unfulfilled. It leaves us feeling empty, driven to search endlessly and compulsively for an elusive "something" that we hope might quench the craving. But we do not know what we want, or even why we want it.

Like the monkey drawn to the baited pot, we grasp at all sorts of things — and ideas — with essentially the same results. We get trapped, if not in the literal, physical sense, then certainly psychologically, which makes the suffering even more damaging and prolonged. And the emptiness persists.

But there is a solution, and it is rather simple. Simple, now, though not necessarily easy. Rather than give in and blindly obey these impulses to grasp more, to acquire more, to hoard more, we need to confront and analyze them. Where do they arise, and why? The answers may surprise us: Behind this acquisitiveness is the ego-concept, which necessarily gives rise to insecurity and fear in myriad forms. These in turn

cause us, consciously or subconsciously, to seek all sorts of things with which to defend the apparent solidity of the ego, to embellish and adorn it, and to build a protective wall around it: power, status, fame, attention, and material possessions. We are even driven to exaggerate the basic requisites of food, clothing, shelter, and medicine to rather outlandish proportions.

To put it simply, due to ignorance of the nature of the ego, we fail to make the distinction between "This is needed" and "I WANT." Through ego-motivated thinking we create a great deal of unnecessary suffering for ourselves, and we sacrifice much, even most of the quality of our lives.

The Buddha taught that as conditioned beings living in a conditioned existence (Samsara) we can never be completely free of all sorts of unpleasantness, stress, and suffering. All conditioned phenomena are flawed, and that inevitably gives rise to unsatisfactoriness. This is the First Noble Truth of the Buddha's teaching, and far from being a vague philosophical speculation, it is something that each of us experiences first hand for him- or-herself in daily life. While true and permanent freedom (Nibbana) comes about as a result of the insight gained through Vipassana meditation, we can eliminate a great deal of unnecessary suffering in the meantime by applying the principle of renunciation.

Unfortunately, the very word "renunciation" has a strange medieval ring to it in this modern, Western-dominated, supposedly hedonistic age. For most, it carries the smell of sack-cloth and ashes, an image of penance, self-denial, self-deprivation, even self-torture. It is thought of as a negative, dejected turning away from the world, a gloomy giving up on life, the last refuge of spurned lovers and aging old maids.

It is none of those things. Genuine renunciation, as the Buddha teaches it, is akin to throwing open the windows of the mind to morning sunshine and crisp, cool air. Renunciation is "cleaning house," getting rid of trash and useless clutter, both figurative and literal. It is recognizing that when we become attached to things, we do not own them, instead they own us. It is putting things in proper perspective, simplifying our lives, and being satisfied with "enough."

In short, it is COMMON SENSE.

No need to say more.

You're smarter than the monkey.

You can figure it all out from here.

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