

## **Buddhism and Money: The Repression of Emptiness Today**

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### **Buddhist Ethics and Modern Society**

No. 31 (1991)

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The modern world is so materialistic that we sometimes joke about the religion of "moneytheism." But the joke is on us: for more and more people, the value-system of money is supplanting traditional religions, as part of a profound secular conversion we only dimly understand. I think that Buddhism (with some help from the psychoanalytic concept of repression) can explain this historical transformation and show us how to overcome it.

The Buddhist doctrine of no-self implies that our fundamental repression is not sex (as Freud thought), nor even death (as existential psychologists think), but the intuition that the ego-self does not exist, that our self consciousness is a mental construction. Here, the repressed intuition "returns to consciousness in distorted form" as the symbolic ways we compulsively try to ground ourselves and make ourselves real in the world: such as power, fame, and of course money.

To present a Buddhist critique of the money-complex, and the Buddhist solution, this paper is divided into two parts. The first part summarizes the existential-psychoanalytic understanding of the human condition and modifies that by bringing in the fundamental insight of anatma, the denial of ego-self. The Buddhist critique of the ego-self not only gives us a different perspective on repression, it also suggests a different way of resolving the problem of repression. The second part applies the conclusions to understand the psychological and spiritual role of money for modern secular humanity, demonstrating how the money complex amounts to a demonic religion - demonic because it cannot absolve our sense of lack.

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### **The Repression of Emptiness**

When Samuel Johnson was asked, "I wonder what pleasure men can take in making beasts of themselves?" he answered: "He who makes a beast of himself gets rid of the pain of being a man." [\[1\]](#)

Dr. Johnson's reply points to why we anaesthetize ourselves with alcohol, television, and so money other physical and mental addictions. (As Dr. Johnson also knew, the alternative to not getting rid of that pain is often depression.) Today, Western philosophy and psychology have finally caught up with his insight: existentialism highlights the anguish of the human condition, and psychoanalysis traces neurosis, including the low-grade neurosis we call normality, back to anxiety. But why is it painful just to be a human being? What causes our anguish and anxiety? This is where Buddhism can carry the analysis one step further.

Freud emphasized that repression is the key discovery underlying all psychoanalysis. The concept is basically simple: when something (usually a thought or a feeling) makes me uncomfortable and I do not want to cope with it consciously, I may choose to ignore or "forget" it. This clears the way for me to concentrate on something else, but at a price: part of my psychic energy must be spent resisting what has been repressed, to keep it out of consciousness, so there is persistent tension. Even worse, what has been repressed usually returns to consciousness, by being transformed into a symptom that is symbolic (because that symptom re-presents the repressed phenomenon in distorted form). Freud understood the hysterics and phobias of his middle-class Viennese patients to be symptoms of repressed sexuality, and therefore concluded that sexual repression is our primal repression. As with many of us, however, his attention gradually shifted from sexuality to death as he got older. More recent existential psychologists, such as analysts Rollo May and Irvin Yalom and scholars Norman O. Brown and Ernest Becker, have shifted the focus from sexual dynamics to the fundamental issues of life and death, freedom and responsibility, groundlessness and meaninglessness- concerns that are just as central to Buddhism, and therefore make possible a more fruitful dialogue between Buddhism and psychoanalysis. [\[2\]](#)

William James observed that our "common instinct for reality ... has always held the world to be essentially a theater for heroism." But why do we want to be heroes? Natural narcissism and our need for self-esteem mean that each of us needs to feel we are of special value. Heroism is how we justify that need to count more than anyone or anything else, because it can qualify us for a special destiny. And why do we need a special destiny? Because the alternative is literally too much to contemplate. The irony of humanity's unique ability to symbolize is that it reveals our fate that much more clearly. According to most existential psychoanalysts, our primary

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repression is not sexuality, but death. Although fear of death is necessary for self-preservation, it must be repressed for us to function with any degree of psychological comfort. Most animals have such fears programmed into them as instincts, but we fashion our fears out of the ways we perceive the world, [\[3\]](#) suggesting that, if we can come to experience the world differently, we might be able to fashion our fears differently, too. Or is it the opposite: do our fears cause us to perceive the world the way we do, and might someone experience the world differently if they were brave enough to face the thing we avoid most?

According to Becker, "everything that man does in his symbolic world is an attempt to deny and overcome his grotesque fate. He literally drives himself into a blind obliviousness with social games, psychological tricks, personal preoccupations so far removed from the reality of his situation that they are forms of madness." Even our character-traits are an example of this, because they provide

an automatic response to situations. These sedimented habits are a necessary protection, for without them the e can only be "full and open psychosis"; to see the world as it really is "devastating and terrifying" "it makes routine, automatic, secure, self-confident activity impossible... It places a trembling animal at the mercy of the entire cosmos and the problem of the meaning of it." Thus the bite in Pascal's aphorism: "Human beings are so necessarily mad that not to be mad would amount to another form of madness." For Becker this is literally true: what we regard as normality is our collective, protective madness, in which we repress the grim truth about the human condition. Those who have difficulty playing this game are the ones we call mentally ill. Schizophrenics are suffering from the truth. Psychoanalysis reveals the high price of denying this truth about the human condition, "what we might call the costs of pretending not to be mad." [4]

Thus, the early experience of the child becomes an attempt "to deny the anxiety of his emergence, his fear of losing his support, of standing alone, helpless and afraid." This leads to what Becker calls "the great scientific simplification of psychoanalysis":

This despair is avoided by building defenses; and these defenses allow us to feel a basic sense of self-worth, of meaningfulness, of power. They allow us to feel in control of life and death, that one really does live and act as a willful and free individual, that one has a unique and self-fashioned identity, that we are somebody....All of us are driven to be supported in a self-forgetful way, ignorant of what energies we really draw on, of the kind of lie we have fashioned to live securely and serenely. [5]

This implies a different way of understanding such key Freudian concepts as guilt and the Oedipal complex. Freud traced guilt back to early

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ambivalent feelings of the child, especially hate and death-wishes directed toward parents that alternate with fears of losing them. Existential psychoanalysis sees the problem as far more basic: "Guilt, as the existentialists put it, is the guilt of being itself. It reflects the self-conscious animal's bafflement at having emerged from nature, at sticking out too much without knowing what for, at not being able to place himself securely in an eternal meaning system." [6] Such "pure" guilt has nothing to do with feared punishment for secret wishes; rather, the major sin is the sin of being born, as Samuel Beckett put it. It is the worm in the heart of the human condition, apparently an inescapable consequence of self-consciousness itself.

This transforms Freud's Oedipal complex into an Oedipal project: the never-ending attempt to become one's own father, as Freud realized, but not by sleeping with mother. Why? To become one's own father is to become what Nagarjuna described as self-existing - and exposed as an impossibility. Becker calls the Oedipal project a flight from obliteration and contingency. The child wants to conquer death by becoming the creator and sustainer of its own life. To be one's own father is to be one's own origin. In Buddhist terms, we could say that the Oedipal project is the attempt of the developing sense of self to become autonomous. It is the quest to deny one's groundlessness by becoming one's own ground: the ground (socially conditioned and approved but nonetheless illusory) of being an independent person, a self-sufficient Cartesian ego. From a Buddhist perspective, then, what is called the Oedipal complex is due to the discovery of the child that it is not part of mother,

after all. The problem is not so much that Dad has first claim on Mom, as what that means to the child's dawning realization of separation: "But if I am not part of Mom, what am I part of?" This becomes, more generally: what am I? who am I? A need is generated to discover one's own ground, or rather to create it - a futile project never to be fulfilled, except by identifying with something ("I may not be Mom, but I am this!") - which, of course, always includes the fear of losing whatever one is attached to. The result is a delusive sense of self always anxious about its own groundlessness.

If so, the Oedipal project actually derives from our intuition that selfconsciousness is not something obviously "self-existing" but a fiction, ungrounded because it is a mental construct. Rather than being selfsufficient, consciousness is more like the surface of the sea: dependent on unknown depths ("conditions," as the Buddha called them) that it cannot grasp because it is a manifestation of them. The problem arises because this conditioned, and therefore unstable, consciousness wants to ground itself, to make itself real. But to real-ize itself is to objectify itself - meaning to grasp itself, since an object is that-which-is-grasped. The ego-self is this continuing attempt to objectify oneself by grasping oneself, something we can no more do than a hand can grasp itself.

The consequence of this is that the sense of self always has, as its

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inescapable shadow, a sense of lack, which (alas!) it always tries to escape. It is here that the psychoanalytic concept of repression becomes helpful, for the idea of "the return of the repressed" distorted into a symptom shows us how to link this basic yet hopeless project with the symbolic ways we try to overcome our sense of lack by making ourselves real in the world. We experience this deep sense of lack as the feeling that "there is something wrong with me." It can be manifested in many different forms, and we can react to that feeling in many different ways. One of the most popular is the money complex, which will be discussed later. A better example for most intellectuals is the craving to be famous, which illustrates perhaps the main way we try to make ourselves real: through the eyes of others. (If we can persuade enough others that we exist,...) In its "purer" forms lack appears as guilt or anxiety that is almost unbearable, because it gnaws at the very core of one's being. For that reason we are eager to objectify anxiety into fear of something, because then we know what to do: we have ways to defend ourselves against the feared thing.

The tragedy of these objectifications, however, is that (for example) no amount of fame can ever be enough if it is not really fame you want. When we do not understand what is actually motivating us - because what we think we want is only a symptom of something else (here, our desire to become real) - we end up being compulsive, "driven." Such a Buddhist analysis implies that no true "mental health" can be found, except in an enlightenment that puts an end to the sense of lack that "shadows" the sense of self, by putting an end to the sense of self.

I do not know if psychoanalysis is coming close to the same realization, but it has come to agree with the great insight of existentialism: anxiety is fundamental to the self, not something we have but something we are. The anguish and despair neurotics complain of are not the result of their symptoms but their cause; these symptoms shield them from the tragic contradictions at the heart of the human situation: death, guilt, meaninglessness. "The irony of man's condition is that the deepest

need is to be free of the anxiety of death and annihilation; but it is life itself that awakens it, and so we must shrink from being fully alive." [7]

This suggests a new perspective on the sense of guilt that seems to bedevil our lives: it is not the cause of our unhappiness, but its effect. "The ultimate problem is not guilt but the incapacity to live. The illusion of guilt is necessary for an animal that cannot enjoy life, in order to organize a life of nonenjoyment." [8] This shifts the essential issue from what we have done to why we feel bad. From the Buddhist perspective, if the autonomy of selfconsciousness is a delusion that can never quite shake off its shadow-feeling that "something is wrong with me," it will need to rationalize that sense of inadequacy somehow. If fear of death rebounds as fear of life, they become two sides of the same coin. Then genuine life cannot be opposed to death but must embrace both life and death. "Whoever rightly understands and

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celebrates death, at the same time magnifies life" (Rilke). The great irony is that, as long as we crave immortality, we are dead.

Most psychoanalysts have decided that it is not possible to end anxiety, but that conclusion does not necessarily follow. Rather, what follows is that ending death anxiety would require ending the ego-self as usually experienced, a possibility Brown is sympathetic to: "since anxiety is the ego's incapacity to accept death, the sexual organizations [Freud's anal, oral and genital stages of ego-development] were perhaps constructed by the ego in its flight from death, and could be abolished by an ego strong enough to die." [9] An ego strong enough to die: in Buddhist terms this is a sense of self that suspects it is a fiction, a delusive construction, and is brave enough to "let go" of itself.

Anxiety about death is our reaction to becoming aware of ourselves and our inevitable fate; so it is something we have learned. Is the dilemma of life-confronting-death an objective fact we just see, or is this also something constructed and projected, more like an unconscious, deeply repressed game that each of us is playing with ourselves? According to Buddhism, life-against-death is a delusive way of thinking because it is dualistic, but if the denial of death is the way the ego affirms itself as being alive, that also implies it is the act by which the ego constitutes itself. To be self-conscious is to be conscious of oneself, to grasp oneself, as being alive. Then death-terror is not something the ego has, it is what the ego is. The irony here is that the death-terror that is the ego actually defends only itself. Everything outside is what the ungrounded ego is terrified of, but what is inside? Fear is the inside, for that is what makes everything else the outside.

If the ego is mentally constituted by this dualistic way of thinking, the ego should be able to die without physical death. That is precisely the claim of Buddhism: the sense of self can disappear, but there remains something else that cannot die, because it was never born. Anatma is the "middle way" between the extremes of eternalism (the self survives death) and annihilationism (the self is destroyed at death). Buddhism resolves the problem of life-and-death by deconstructing it. The evaporation of this dualistic way of thinking reveals what is prior to it, which has many names, the most common being "the unborn."

In the Pali canon, the two most famous descriptions of Nirvana both refer to "the unborn," where "neither this world nor the other, nor coming, going or standing, neither death nor birth, nor sense-objects are to be found." [10] Similar claims are common in Mahayana. The most important term in Mahayana is sunyata, "emptiness," and the adjectives most often used to explain sunyata are "unborn," "uncreated" and "unproduced." The laconic Heart Sutra explains that all things are sunya because they are "not created, not annihilated, not impure and not pure, not increasing and not decreasing." [11]

The "Song of Enlightenment" of Yung-chia, a disciple of the sixth Ch'an

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patriarch, says: "Since I abruptly realized the unborn, I have had no reason for joy or sorrow at any honor or disgrace." [12] That "all things are perfectly resolved in the Unborn" was the great realization and the central teaching of the Japanese Zen master Bankei: "When you dwell in the Unborn itself, you're dwelling at the very well head of Buddhas and patriarchs." The Unborn is the Buddha-mind, which is beyond living and dying. [13]

For Buddhism, the dualism between life and death is only one instance of a more general problem with dualistic thinking. We discriminate between such opposites as life and death in order to affirm one and deny the other, and, our tragedy lies in the paradox that the two opposed terms are interdependent. In this case, there is no life without death and - what we are more likely to overlook - there is no death without life. This means our problem is not death but life-and-death. If we can realize that there is no delineated ego-self that is alive now, the problem of life-and-death is solved. Since our minds have created this dualism, they should be able to un-create or deconstruct it. This is not a devious intellectual trick to solve the problem logically, while leaving our anguish as deep as before. The examples above refer to a different way of experiencing, not some conceptual understanding. It is no coincidence that the Prajnaparamita sutras of Mahayana also repeatedly emphasize that there are no sentient beings.

The Buddha: "Subhuti, what do you think? You should not say that the Tathagata has this thought: 'I should liberate living beings.' Subhuti, you should not think so. Why? Because there are really no living beings for the Tathagata to liberate. If there were, the Tathagata would hold (the concept of) an ego, a personality, a being and a life. Subhuti, (when) the Tathagata speaks of an ego, there is in reality no ego, although common people think so. Subhuti, the Tathagata says common people are not, but (expediently) called, common people. [14]

If there is no one who has life, then there is no reason to fear death. If the ego-self is not a thing but a continual process of consciousness trying to grab hold of itself and objectify itself - which, since it can never do so, leads to self-paralysis - unmediated experience "of" the Unborn is the final shipwreck of that project. The problem is resolved at its source. The ego-self that has been trying to make itself real by identifying with one thing or another in the objective world collapses. In terms of life-versus-death, the ego-self forecloses on its greatest anxiety by letting go and dying now. "Die before you die, so that when you come to die you will not have to die," as the Sufis put it. Of course, if the ego is really a construct - composed of automatized, mutually-reinforcing ways of thinking,

feeling and acting - it cannot really die, yet it can evaporate, in the sense that those cease to recur.  
Insofar as

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these constitute our basic defense against the world (in psychoanalytic terms) and our main hope of making ourselves real (in Buddhist terms), this letting-go is not going to be easy. It means giving up my most cherished ways of thinking about myself (notice the reflexivity), which are what I think I am, to stand naked and exposed. No wonder it is called the Great Death.

This cannot save the body from aging and deteriorating; then does such ego-death really solve our problem? Yes, because the Buddhist analysis of the "empty" ego-self implies that death is not our deepest fear, and the desire to become immortal is not our deepest hope, for even they are symptoms that represent something else. They symbolize the desire of the sense of self to become a real self, to transform its anguished lack of being into genuine being. Even the terror of death represses something, for that terror is preferable to facing one's lack of being now: death-fear at least allows us to project the problem into the future, so we avoid facing what we are (or are not) right now.

One way to approach this is to consider whether immortality - the actuality of an existence that never ended - could really satisfy us. As much as we may fear death, is ceaseless life really the solution? Many have suspected that, like "the immortal" in Borges' story of the same title, our existence would eventually become a burden, unless we discovered a meaning system to place it in, a cosmology wherein we had both a home and a role. As the interminable succession of centuries undermined all my futile projects to make myself real, what anguish would accumulate! Mere immortality would become unbearable as soon as I no longer craved it. As with other symbolic (because repressed) games, victory in the form I seek it cannot satisfy me if I really want something else.

This implies that our ultimate hunger is ontological: it can be satisfied by nothing less than becoming real, which in the nondualist terms of Mahayana means realizing that my mind is actually one with -- nothing other than -- the whole universe; and that is possible if the core of my own egoconsciousness is not self-existing but hollow, because groundless: If consciousness is not "inside," there is no outside." Then even the desire for immortality is reduced to a symptom, the usual (but distorted) way at we become aware of this repressed spiritual thirst. Death too becomes reduced to a symbol, not only representing the feared failure of this reality project, but also serving as a catch-all for all the ugly, negative, tragic aspects of existence that we cannot cope with and so project as the Shadow of Life. [\[15\]](#)

Why do we need to project ourselves indefinitely into the future, unless something is felt to be lacking now? Obviously, we are afraid of losing something then that we have now. Many have found this unpersuasive, answering it with variations on the theme that, if life is not something we have but something we are, there is nothing to fear because we shall not be around to notice (what) we are missing. Epicurus stoically asserted that "the

most horrible of all evils, death, is nothing to us, for when we exist, death is not present; but when death is present, then we are not." A more Buddhist formulation is that, if nothing is lacking now, immortality loses its compulsion as the way to resolve lack, and whether or not we survive physical death becomes, if not irrelevant, at least not the main point.

Then what is the main point? According to "Buddhist psychoanalytics," our most intimate duality is not life-versus-death but being-versus-nonbeing; and our most troublesome repression is not life repressing death but the sense of self repressing its suspected nothingness. Instead of identifying with being the Buddhist approach is to conflate their duality by not rejecting nonbeing; that can lead to the discovery of what is prior to the polarization between them. "Being is not being; non-being is not non being. Miss this rule by a hair and you are off by a thousand miles" (Yung-chia again). The speculations of theologians and metaphysicians are only the most abstract form of this game, which I suspect is our most troublesome game, because the bifurcation between being and nonbeing (or reality versus nothingness, existence versus emptiness, etc.) is not obvious and natural but mentally constructed, a separation that has to be maintained. The tension between them is the core of existential anguish, the source of our sense of lack. Again we see why a sense of lack is the shadow of the sense of self. Like the matter and anti-matter particles of quantum physics, they arise together, opposing each other; and they disappear together by collapsing back into each other - which leaves not the nothingness we so dread (for that is one of the two terms) but... what?

The way to end that bifurcation, like any other dualism, is to yield to the side that we have avoided in this instance, to forget oneself and let go. If it is nothingness we are afraid of, the solution is to become nothing. Meditation is learning to forget the self by becoming absorbed in one's meditation-object (mantra, etc.). If the sense of self is a result of consciousness attempting to reflect back upon itself to grasp itself, meditation is an exercise in de-reflection. Enlightenment or liberation occurs when the usually-automatic reflexivity of consciousness ceases, which is experienced as a letting-go and falling into the void." "Men are afraid to forget their minds, fearing to fall through the Void with nothing to stay their fall. They do not know that the Void is not really void, but the realm of the teal Dharma" (Huang-po). [\[16\]](#) What we fear as nothingness is not really nothingness, for that is the perspective of a groundless sense of self haunted by the fear of losing its grip on itself. Religious faith should provide not a bulwark against such nothingness, but the courage to let oneself fall into it. Letting go of myself and merging with that nothingness leads to something else, the common origin both of what I experience as nothingness and of what I experience as myself. When consciousness stops trying to catch its own tail, I become nothing, and discover that I am everything - or, more precisely, that I can be anything." [\[17\]](#)

### **The Money Complex**



If there is to be a psychoanalysis of money, it must start from the hypothesis that the money complex has the essential structure of religion - or, if you will, the negation of religion, the demonic. The psychoanalytic theory of money must start by establishing the proposition that money is, in Shakespeare's words, the "visible God"; in Luther's words, "the God of this world." [\[18\]](#)

Money is both a religion and the negation of religion, because the money complex is motivated by our religious need to redeem ourselves (fill our sense of lack). In Buddhist terms, the demonic results from the sense of self trying to make itself real (that is, objectify itself) by grasping the spiritual in this world. This can be done only unconsciously, that is, symbolically. Today, our most important symbol is money.

Schopenhauer notes that money is human happiness in abstracto; consequently, one who is no longer capable of happiness in concrete sets one's whole heart on money. It is questionable whether there is really such a thing as happiness in abstraction, but the second half is true: to the extent one becomes preoccupied with symbolic happiness, one is not alive to concrete happiness. The difficulty is not with money as a convenient medium of exchange, but with the "money complex" that arises when money become the desired thing - that is, desirable in itself. How does this happen? Given our sense of lack, how could this not happen?

Money is the "purest" symbol, "because there is nothing in reality that corresponds to it." [\[19\]](#) In itself it is worthless: you cannot eat or drink it, plant it, ride in it or sleep under it. Yet it has more value than anything else because it is value, because it is how we define value, and therefore it can transform into anything else. The psychological problem arises when life becomes motivated by the desire for that pure value. We all sense what is wrong with this, but it is helpful to make it explicit: to the extent that life becomes focused around the desire for money, an ironic reversal takes place between means and ends; everything is degraded into a mere means to that worthless end, all else is devalued to maximize merely symbolic ends, because our desires have been fetishized into that pure symbol. We end up rejoicing not at a worthwhile job well done, or meeting a friend, or hearing a bird-song - the genuine elements of our life - but at accumulating pieces of paper. How such madness could occur becomes apparent when we relate it to the sense of self's sense of lack, whose festering keeps us from being able fully to enjoy that bird-song (just this), etc. Since we no longer believe in an original sin, what can it be that is wrong with us? Without some religious expiation, how can we hope to recover? Today the socially approved explanation -- the contemporary original sin -- is that we do not have enough money; and the solution is to get more, until we have enough

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and no longer feel any lack -- which ends up being never.

The transition from barter is hard to understand; how can human cravings be fetishized into pieces of metal? The answer is elegant because it reveals not only the origin of money, but its character even today. Money was and still is literally sacred: "It has long been known that the first markets were sacred markets, the first banks were temples, the first to issue money were priests or priest-kings." [\[20\]](#) The first coins were minted and distributed by temples because they were medallions inscribed with the image of their god and embodying his protective power. Containing

such manna, they were naturally in demand, not because you could buy things with them but vice-versa: since they were popular, you could exchange them for other things.

The consequence of this was that "now the cosmic powers could be the property of everyman , without even the need to visit temples: you could now traffic in immortality in the marketplace." This eventually led to the emergence of a new kind of person, "who based the value of his life - and so of his immortality - on a new cosmology centered on coins." A new meaning system arose, which our present economic system makes increasingly the meaning-system. "Money becomes the distilled value of all existence ... a single immortality symbol a ready way of relating the increase of oneself to all the important objects and events of one's world." [21] If we replace "immortality" with "becoming real," the point becomes Buddhist: beyond its usefulness as a medium of exchange, money has become modern humanity's most popular way of accumulating Being of coping with our gnawing intuition that we do not really exist. Suspecting that the sense of self is a groundless construction, we went to temples and churches to ground ourselves in God; now we ground ourselves financially.

The problem is that the true meaning of this meaning-system is unconscious, which means, as usual, that we end up paying a heavy price for it. The value we place on money karmically rebounds back against us: the more we value it, the more we use it to evaluate ourselves. In his great historical study of death in Western culture, *The Hour of our Death*, Philippe Aries considers the modern attitude toward material things and turns our usual critique upside down. Today we complain about materialism, but the modern person is not really materialistic, because "things have become means of production, or objects to be consumed or devoured":

Can one describe a civilization that has emptied things in this way as materialistic? On the contrary, it is the late Middle Ages, up to the beginning of modern times, that were materialistic!... [I]he ordinary person [now] in their daily Life no more believes in matter than they believe in God. The individual in the Middle Ages believed in matter and in God, in life and in death, in the enjoyment of things and their renunciation." [22]

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Our problem today is that we no longer believe in things but in symbols, hence our life has passed over into these symbols and their manipulation and then we find ourselves manipulated by the symbols we take so seriously. We are preoccupied not so much with what money can buy, but its power and status; not with a Mercedes-Bent in itself, but what owning a Mercedes says about us. Modern humanity would not be able to endure real economic equality, "because he has no faith in self-transcendent, otherworldly immortality symbols; visible physical worth is the only thing he has to give him eternal life." Or real Being. Our spiritual hunger to become real, or at least to occupy a special place in the cosmos, has been reduced to having a bigger car than our neighbors! It seems that we cannot get rid of the sacred, because we cannot get rid of our ultimate concerns, except by repressing them, whereupon we become "the more uncontrollably driven by them." [23]

The most brilliant chapter of *Life Against Death*, "Filthy Lucre," links money to guilt: "Whatever the ultimate explanation of guilt may be, we put forward the hypothesis that the whole money complex is rooted in the psychology of guilt." The psychological advantage of archaic society is that

it "knew" what the problem was and therefore how to overcome it. Belief in sin allowed the possibility of expiation, in seasonal rituals and sacrifices. This provides a different perspective on the origin of gods: The gods exist to receive gifts, that is to say, sacrifices; the gods exist in order to structure the human need for self-sacrifice." [24] For Christianity that sacrifice is incarnated in Christ, who is believed to "take away" our sins. Religion gives us the opportunity to expiate our sense of lack by means of symbols - for example, the crucifix, the eucharist, the mass - whose validity is socially agreed upon and maintained. Hence, we feel purified and closer to God after taking Holy Communion.

What of the modern "neurotic type," who "feels a sinner without the religious belief in sin, for which he therefore needs a new rational explanation?" [25] What do you do with your sense of lack, when there is no religious explanation for it, and therefore no socially-agreed way to expiate it? The main secular alternative today is to experience our lack as "not yet enough." This converts cyclic time (maintained by seasonal rituals of atonement) into linear time (in which the atonement of lack is reached for but perpetually postponed, because never achieved). The sense of lack remains a constant, but our collective reaction to it has become the need for growth: the "good life" of consumerism (but lack means the consumer never has enough) and the gospel of sustained economic growth (because corporations and the GNP are never big enough). The heart (or rather blood) of both is the money complex. "A dollar is ... a codified psychosis normal in one sub-species of this animal, an institutionalized dream that everyone is having at once." [26]

The result of this is "an economy driven by a pure sense of guilt,

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unmitigated by any sense of redemption," "the more uncontrollably driven by the sense of guilt because the problem of guilt is repressed by denial into the unconscious." [27] Today our particular form of that insanity is the cult of economic growth, which has become our main religious myth. "We no longer give our surplus to God; the process of producing an ever-expanding surplus is in itself our God.... To quote Schumpeter: "Capitalist rationality does not do away with sub- or super-rational impulses. It merely makes them get out of hand by removing the restraint of sacred or semi-sacred tradition." [28]

Money (the blood) and economic growth (the body) constitute a defective myth because they can provide no expiation of guilt - in Buddhist terms, no resolution of lack. Our new holy or holies, the true temple of modern humanity, is the stock market, and our rite of worship is communing with the Dow Jones average. In return, we receive the kiss of profits and the promise of more to come, but there is no atonement in this. Of course, insofar as we have lost belief in sin, we no longer see anything to atone for, which means we end up unconsciously atoning in the only way we know how, working hard to acquire all those things that society tells us are important and will make us happy. Then we cannot understand why they do not make us happy, why they do not resolve our sense of lack. The reason can only be that we do not yet have enough. "But the fact is that the human animal is distinctively characterized, as a species and from the start, by the drive to produce a surplus.... There is something in the human psyche which commits man to nonenjoyment, to work." Where are we all going so eagerly? "Having no real aim, acquisitiveness, as Aristotle correctly said, has no limit." Not to anywhere but from something, which is why there can be no end to it as long as that

something is our own lack shadow. "Economies, archaic and civilized, are ultimately driven by that flight from death which turns life into death-in-life." [29] Or by that flight from emptiness that makes life empty: by an intuition of nothingness that, when repressed, only deepens my sense that there is something very wrong with me.

In Buddhist terms, then, money symbolizes becoming real, but since we never quite become real we only make our sense of lack more real. We end up in infinite deferral, for those chips we have accumulated can never be cashed in. The moment we do so, the illusion that money can resolve lack is dispelled; we are left more empty and lad-ridden than before, being deprived of our fantasy for escaping lack. We unconsciously suspect and fear this; the only answer is to flee faster into the future. This points the fundamental defect of any economic system that requires continual growth to survive: it is based not on needs but on fear, for it feeds on and feeds our sense of lack. In sum, our preoccupation with manipulating the purest symbol, which we symptom to be the means of solving the problem of life, turns out to be a symptom of the problem.

If this critique of the money complex is valid, what is the solution? It is

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the same solution that Buddhism has always offered: not any quick fix that can be conditioned into us, but the personal transformation that occurs when we make the effort to follow the Buddhist path, which means learning how to let go of ourselves and die. Once we are dead, once we have become nothing and realize that we can be anything, we see money for what it is: not a symbolic way to make ourselves real to measure ourselves by, but a socially-constituted device that expands our freedom and power. Then we become truly free to determine our attitude toward it, toward getting it and using it. If we are dead, there is nothing wrong with money: not money but love of money is the root of evil. However, we also know that our essential nature does not get better or worse; just as it does not come or go, so it has nothing to gain or to lose. For those who do not experience themselves as separate from the world - as other than the world - the value of money becomes closely tied to its ability to help alleviate suffering. Bodhisattvas are not attached to it, and therefore they are not afraid of it; so they know what to do with it.

## Notes

1. Murray's Johnsonia.
2. Rollo May et al., ed., *Existence* (New York: Basic Books, 1958); Irvin D. Yalom, *Existential Psychotherapy* (New York: Basic Books, 1980); Norman O. Brown, *Life Against Death: The Psychoanalytic Meaning of History* (New York: Vintage, 1961); Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (New York: Free Press, 1973) and *Escape from Evil* (New York: Free Press, 1975).
3. Becker, *Denial of Death*, pp. 11-18.

[4.](#) Becker, Denial of Death, pp. 27, 66, 60, 29; Becker, Escape from Evil, p. 163. Pascal's Pensees, no. 414.

[5.](#) Becker, Denial of Death, pp. 54-55.

[6.](#) Becker, Escape from Evil, p. 158.

[7.](#) Becker, Denial of Death, pp. 181-82 (quoting Roy D. Waldman), and p. 66 (my emphasis).

[8.](#) Brown, p. 268.

[9.](#) Brown, p. 113.

[10.](#) Udana 6, 7:1-3 (my emphasis in the first selection).

[11.](#) Heart Sutra; my translation.

[12.](#) All Yung-chia quotations are taken from an unpublished translation by Robert Aitken, director of the Diamond Sangha in Honolulu, Hawaii.

[13.](#) Norman Waddell, ed. and trans., The Unborn: The Life and Teachings of Zen Master Bankei (San Francisco: N