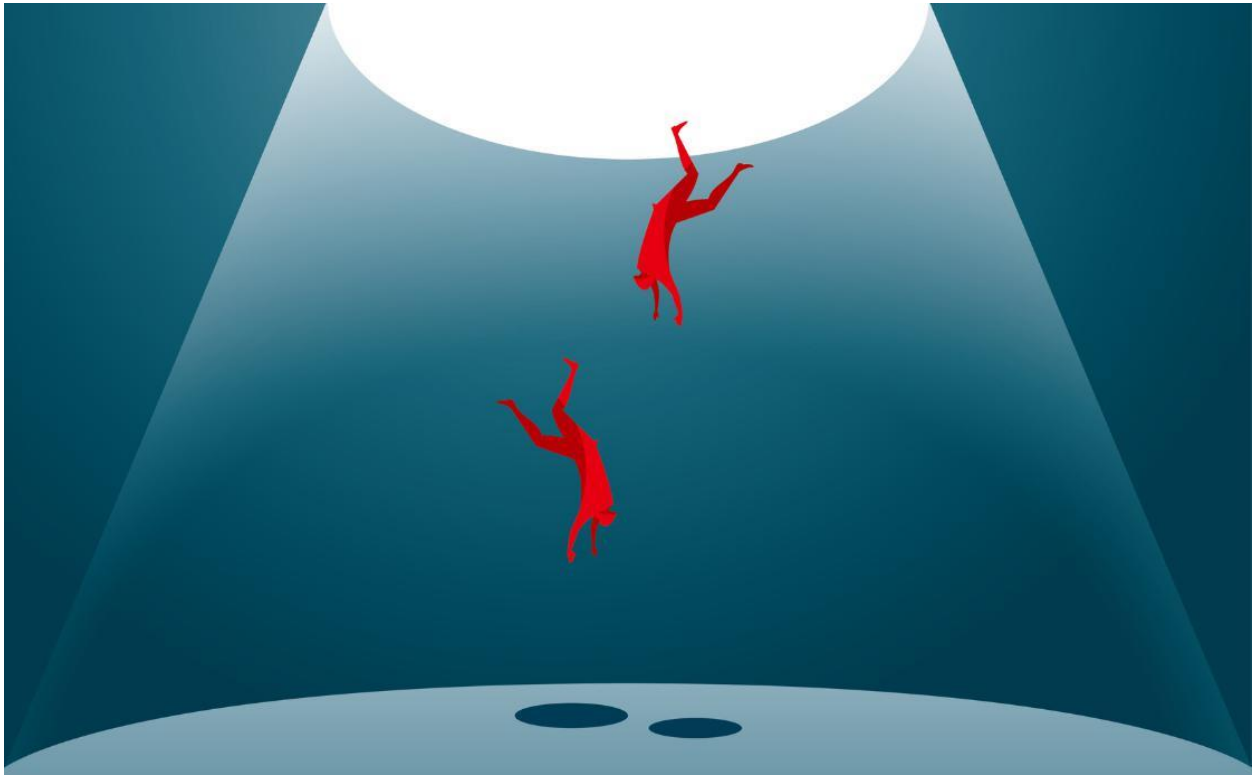


The 3 Big Life Traps: Materialism, Imitation, and the Ego

V. M. GOPAUL



If we want to achieve the deep spiritual purpose of this life, we all have at least three major obstacles to avoid – materialism, imitation, and the self-glorification our egos demand.

To illustrate materialism, consider the fictional case of Dr. Steve Kalichuck, a very successful cosmetic surgeon who has one simple goal: to enjoy life as much as possible. For Steve, there is no life beyond death. Therefore, he must make the most of this life, which to him means to increase his enjoyment as much as possible. He adorns himself with gold jewelry, wears expensive designer clothing, lives in a luxurious home, takes exotic vacations, and drives fast cars. His wife and three children share his values. When they do not get what they want, they become angry, jealous, and are often rude towards others and even each other. Focused as they are on the material, they miss opportunities to develop spiritual qualities.

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This family, and every other family like it, has not yet experienced its spiritual birth. As Baha'u'llah wrote in his *Book of Certitude*, those who follow the same materialistic path as our imaginary surgeon have set their:

... affections on the things of the world, such as attachment to earthly goods, to wife, children, food, drink, and the like, so much so that in the day-time and in the night season his one concern had been to amass riches and procure for himself the means of enjoyment and pleasure.

Now consider imitation, which can be characterized as an attachment to archaic ideas, distorted visions, outworn traditions, and counterproductive habits. The Baha'i teachings say that all such attachments are veils blocking our spiritual vision.

Baha'u'llah taught that periodically a new messenger from God appears with fresh teachings for humanity. When that happens, initially only a few accept the new revelation. For example, at the time of Christ's death, just a handful of disciples accepted his new teachings, because he did not fulfill the literal expectations for the Messiah. Likewise, today our religious and societal traditions have become barriers to new knowledge, reinforced by the fact that most people automatically and unquestioningly follow the religion and the traditions of their parents. Imitating the beliefs and actions of others invariably leads to blindness and injustice, as Baha'u'llah pointed out in his writings:

The essence of all that We have revealed for thee is Justice, is for man to free himself from idle fancy and imitation, discern with the eye of oneness His glorious handiwork, and look into all things with a searching eye.

Finally, we come to self-glorification, which can be viewed as the ego's attachment to one's own virtues, whether real or perceived.

Intelligence is a virtue, but we can easily become arrogant if we dwell too much on this quality. Having intelligence only truly benefits our souls if we practice humility. Each person's inner characteristics naturally become part of our identity, and can be seen in our spiritual accomplishments – but even a positive quality can become a hurdle when we allow it to become self-righteous.

When we start to feel superior to others, our arrogance will be manifested in our behavior. For example, a kind person who grows proud of his kindness may start to perform acts of kindness not out of pure-heartedness but to show off. He may further start to judge others as less kind than himself. The resulting behavior will be anything but kind.

Pride and the tendency to view others as inferior is a sure sign of the ego's attachment to our qualities. Spiritual maturity, on the other hand, is evidenced by the ability to recognize that every soul has received its fair share of divine grace. We must cultivate humility to the same degree that we do other divine qualities. Abdu'l-Baha, the son and successor of Baha'u'llah, defined the dangers of the ego in a speech he gave in Boston in 1912:

Man possesses two kinds of susceptibilities: the natural emotions, which are like dust upon the mirror, and spiritual susceptibilities, which are merciful and heavenly characteristics. There is a power which purifies the mirror from dust and transforms its reflection into intense brilliancy and radiance so that spiritual susceptibilities may chasten the hearts and

heavenly bestowals sanctify them. What is the dust which obscures the mirror? It is attachment to the world, avarice, envy, love of luxury and comfort, haughtiness and self-desire; this is the dust which prevents reflection of the rays of the Sun of Reality in the mirror.

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This attachment is the most dangerous of all. It is like the arrow that shoots down a high-flying bird. No matter how advanced, a soul can be brought crashing to the ground if wounded by the arrows of the ego – jealousy, power, greed, or self-adoration.

Everything around us from food and clothing to family and friendship has been created for our enjoyment. When gained in legitimate ways, we should enjoy them wholeheartedly and be truly thankful for them. None of these things, however, should ever become like gods to us, overshadowing our true God and causing us to forget Him. None of them should eclipse the light of the Holy Spirit; none of them should extinguish the spirit of faith from our hearts. We must always be vigilant lest any attachment distract us from our real purpose.

A balanced life grows our spiritual powers and expands our awareness beyond imagination.

Rarely do we recognize the wonders surrounding us and of which we are a part.

Let Baha'u'llah explain:

O my brother, understand then the meaning of resurrection and purify thine ears ... Shouldst thou step a little way into the worlds of severance, thou wilt testify that no day greater than this Day and no resurrection mightier than this Resurrection can be imagined, and that one deed in this Day is equivalent to deeds performed during a hundred thousand years – nay, I ask pardon of God for this limitation, because deeds done in this Day are sanctified beyond any limited reward.

The proof of the greatness of this age surrounds us, but a discerning eye is required to recognize it. If we focus on the stories told by the news media, mostly we will hear the negative: financial crises, natural disasters, crime, and armed rebellion. Such events are an aspect of this age, forcing us to seek better solutions to our problems, but they are not the whole story. Wonderful things, too, happen all the time all around the world.

In this age, many things are happening at a very fast pace, potentially confusing us all as to where we should center our main focus. To counter that confusion, the Baha'i teachings say we must walk a physical path with spiritual feet. This requires constant diligence to maintain such a careful balance, knowing that this short life on Earth is not meant for physical indulgence but for our lasting spiritual development.