



Extraordinary Popular Delusions

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In an 1852 book, “Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds”, Charles Markay wrote,

“We find that whole communities suddenly fix their minds upon one object, and go mad in its pursuit; that millions of people become simultaneously impressed with one delusion, and run after it, till their attention is caught by some new folly more captivating than the first.”

An infamous incidence is the Tulipomania of the 1600s, where single bulbs were snatched up for thousands of dollars and fortunes evaporated when the delusion burst.

Before we dismiss this as a historical oddity, we must remember the “dot com” boom and housing bubble of our own time. The same quality of mind that Markay explored is alive and well today. Given the right conditions, our own minds can join a group frenzy of greed and fear. If we are quiet enough, and honest enough, we can see this same process of mind playing out in small ways with sobering frequency. This “madness of crowds” is an amplification of the individual mind. The illusion of separation is the root of the mind driven by longing, fear, and isolation. Awakening from this delusion is why we practice dharma.

The object of our desire, or the subject of our fear, consumes much of our lives. This essentially is the same process as the Tulipomania, where one man was imprisoned for unwittingly destroying a tulip bulb worth four thousand florins. Reflect on the last time a worry or obsession became so gripping that most of your thoughts, emotions, and energy became caught up in it. This all too common trance represents some of our deepest pain. As we look closer, we realize the subtle, moment by moment pull of wanting and not-wanting have the same root cause as “extraordinary popular delusions.” This is good news. As we take care of our own mind, then we automatically reduce our participation in “the madness of crowds.” However, we must question our conviction in the truth of thoughts, especially the thought of “I, me, or mine.” Seeing through this belief in thought goes contrary to the river of our lives. The release of our suffering asks a release of the sense of self.

Practicing the dharma has been said to be like swimming against the current of our lives. Mistaking our thoughts for reality is the stream we swim in, and the stream of our society. The momentum of our lives often seems to push us opposite the direction of the dharma: the engagement of busyness, distractions, worry, and desires. For our practice to deepen enough for true transformation, we need a tremendous level of sincerity and dedication to counteract this belief in thought. We must give our lives over to the dharma, so it becomes the central focus of our lives.

As we mature spiritually, we start to become disillusioned with the objects of fear and desire, and our pursuit starts to fade and quiet. We can’t deny the ultimate lack of fulfillment they contain as we experience disappointment after disappointment. Meditation and inquiry help us directly see this. As we sit unmoving yet with the urge to move, we begin to learn an experience can be met and opened to

without the need to act. We start to experientially see the difference between our thoughts about experience and the actual reality of that experience. We start to not believe our thoughts.

Yet the core process of wanting and not wanting often continues when we haven't seen through the deep fundamental assumptions of self. Then this process may be transferred to our spiritual journey as a subtle, unconscious perspective. We practice diligently, attend retreats and talks, explore the dharma conceptually, all driven by an undercurrent of trying to become or not become someone. We still maintain the "I" who is doing all these things, striving to become a better "I".

A profound paradox emerges here. The tremendous sincerity and urgency needed to question the "Madness of Crowds" (and the individual extraordinary delusion of thought), usually take the form of personal will and effort. Yet, the journey ultimately requires a complete letting go of will and effort, especially as it turns to the belief in thought and separate identity. All sense of "I am doing it" will need to be released. And that release cannot be done by "I."

This brings to mind the scene so often used in cartoons of a character busily sawing away at the very branch on which it sits, and the startled look that follows when the character finds itself suspended in mid-air before the fall. The dharma asks us to sit on the branch of self-belief while we saw away. Yet we cannot make the branch break; it is outside our control or influence. Any sense of trying is creating another branch to sit firmly upon. So then we simply sit, in stillness on the branch. The branch breaks on its own, releasing into the unknown, beyond thought and self.