

The Danger of Nihilism

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Tips of the Day · 4 min read

We are now well into post-truth where it seems there are always ‘alternative facts’. We simply don’t know who are the interested parties giving out the news, or we do know but we don’t know which one to believe. Even when we do know which one we believe, we know there is bias. So, we can never be certain we have enough true information to make an informed decision. This has now become virtually impossible with Generative AI, such as ChatGPT (Chat Generative Pre-Trained Transformer), able to produce an endless stream of concocted images, videos, script and conversation, mimicking human intelligence, yet without an iota of sentiment or wisdom. This can lead to a blind acceptance of anything which fits into our own bias or a healthy scepticism.[i] Another reaction would be to say, ‘I can’t verify anything so I’ll believe in nothing.’ This takes us towards Nihilism -A theory promoting the state of believing in nothing, or of having no allegiances and no purposes.OED. In other words, this lack of assurance can produce in us a lack of self-confidence and stultifies us into doing nothing. When a person finds themselves in this position it can be very disorienting. The ground upon which the understanding of life, morality, politics and social relationships simply disappears. When I left Roman Catholicism, I entered into a phase of this sort of nihilism. Everything I had been taught about God and religion, the purpose of life, seemed so much fantasy. I felt lost and yet coming to terms with a loss of spiritual certainty was strangely reassuring. (I was young, 21!) It made me come face to face with death which makes the whole of life seem a joke. I found a home in Existentialism and especially the work of Albert Camus (The Myth of Sisyphus) who said life had no ultimate purpose and was basically meaningless, yet we should try to make the best of it. This would have been described by the philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche, as an ‘active nihilism’ where we do away with what we do not believe in, but then seek a solution. Morally we decide for ourselves what is virtue and what is vice. Politically, we decide what is needed. As active nihilists, we will be driven to change all institutions, media outlets, political and social structures that we no longer see as fit for purpose. It gets very close to Anarchism which wants to replace any formal and hierarchical structures, with individual actions and voluntary associations. These days such a political, social and economic theory is best represented by Libertarianism[ii]. The danger, of course, is that we are presuming that our own wisdom is more insightful than any other. Just because a group of us agrees does not make it necessarily right. I/we are right, so everyone else must be wrong! It is easier to put aside one’s disbelief and just run with the crowd. Or not care and become apathetic about the way things are. We might find ourselves taking such positions when it comes to the connection between Neoliberalism and Climate Crisis. Neoliberalism based on the attitudes of greed and competition, is the driving force behind the industries and investment that support climate crisis. No viable alternative seems to be in the offing. Not believing there is a solution we lose hope and do nothing. This is what Nietzsche termed ‘passive nihilism’.

We would then be living our lives in bad faith[iii], betraying our ability to act according to our conscience, no matter how small the act. We may find ourselves in a similar situation in the polycrisis that threatens us. One of the qualities of the Dhamma that attracts people is that the teaching is put to us as something to investigate to find out if it is true for ourselves. There is no compulsion to believe. In fact, to believe would undermine the desire to investigate and so render impossible the liberation that comes from realising the truth for ourselves. We are responsible for our own awakening. In this way the Buddha, since we are embedded in society, becomes an expression of an ethic of personal responsibility which reaches out to others. This naturally leads to engagement in society in whatever way we can at all levels – social, economic and political. The Buddha had much to say about establishing an equitable society. He talked about the qualities of kingship and false assertions supporting the caste system. The Buddha, as our exemplar, had to deal with many political situations. He was no stranger to kings and their machinations. By his subtle advice, for instance, he prevented the new King Ajatasattu of Magadha from invading the democratic Vajji Confederacy. Such a perspective demands freedom of expression and the right to make one's views known and have some weight by voting. But equally important is the right to truthful corporations, truthful reporting, truthful politicians. Otherwise, it is not possible for a democracy to function and the way is open to demagogues with easy answers. If we find we may have fallen into error of Nihilism and want to re-engage, for that is what the Dhamma asks of us, we can stimulate a more positive mind-set by developing compassion. This is similar to the practice of Mettā, using a few phrases and offering them to ourselves and to all the categories until we offer our compassion to all beings in all directions. For example: First some phrase to captivate the state we are in: The world is in a dangerous place. The misery from many causes is mounting. May I develop the forgiving, patient and caring attitude to engage and do what I can for the benefit of others. (It doesn't have to be so long-winded!) If this is all we can do, it is enough. Our mindset will affect the way we meet with others. This TEDx presentation by Nolen Gertz, a philosopher who has written widely on Nihilism[iv], points to the subtle ways this nihilistic attitude expresses itself. Just came across this article by Naomi Klein[i] Deep Fake! <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S951cdansBI>[ii] Libertarianism believes that people should be free to think and behave as they want and should not have limits put on them by governments.[iii] In the philosophy of existentialism, bad faith (mauvaise foi) is the psychological phenomenon whereby individuals act inauthentically, by yielding to the external pressures of society to adopt false values and disown their innate freedom as sentient human beings.[1] The same can be said when we opt out of engaging in society. (My comment.)[iv] For further introduction, see Nolen Gertz essay Nihilism. He has also a written book with the same title.

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