

Material World

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We live in a material world. As a minimum we need food, clothes and medicine but most of us want a house and car too and these lead on to mortgage, insurance and don't forget the freezer, sound system, house alarm ... We can use the stresses and strains of material possessions as teachers about the first khanda – material form. Khanda is the Pali for a heap or an 'aggregate', something formed from a mixture of different elements. The Buddha lists five such khanda, the first being material form while the others are to do with the mind. We delude ourselves by clinging to the khanda, building a false identity for ourselves as we struggle hold on to these. Does my identity depend on material form – my body and material possessions? Would I be the same person if I were to lose my house? To have nowhere I could call home, relax, forget the outside world? Nowhere to invite family or friends for Christmas. Would this threaten my self-belief, the sense of who I am? What about losing my eyesight, hearing, mobility? I'm still learning first-khanda lessons from the loss of my voice several years ago, seeing how much of my confidence and sense of self was bound into being able to speak fluently and with a voice I recognise as my own. We get somewhat easier first-khanda lessons every day: when we lose our mobile phone, our car keys, our glasses. Before turning the house upside down, we need to pause, look within, enter the spiritual schoolroom. Does the situation feel irritating or threatening? Listen awhile to the stories we are telling ourselves. We're not interested in the detail but to see how they build and sense of self: I need this because ... I'll lose my job if I don't have ... I want ... I'm fed up ... They will never forgive me if ... This automatic self-chatter always revolves around I, me, mine and how essential the lost item is to I, me, mine. This is how we build and maintain a false identity with the great heap of material possessions we struggle to hold together. The practice is to turn attention away from the story and towards that basic material entity we attach to – the body. Body awareness sets us on the path from delusion to reality. The path might lead through knots of anxiety or tensions that underlie impatience, or the tight jaws of irritation, the tight breath of fear. Our job is to follow the path, no matter what uncomfortable, unedifying terrain it leads through. Eventually the emotions burn out, the body relaxes, we can think more clearly, continue the search more calmly. Car keys and glasses are not the end of the world after all! Mobile phone though ... More fundamentally, we have loosened our binding to the first khanda. We've trusted that there is something more essential than the stories we tell ourselves. That's what the Buddha wants from us – that we search for an essence more reliable than the stories we believe about I, me, mine. He doesn't want us to be satisfied by anything less than perfect the peace and happiness of our true nature. And yet we live in a material world, where all our possessions need care and attention. Can we care for them without building stories around them, tying ourselves into knots of false identity? Can we love the material world without attaching to it?

