

## Pigeon Religion

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I recently saw a documentary describing an experiment with pigeons. Smart birds. They were caged, and easily trained to tap a button to open a small door to access food. Then the experimenters changed conditions. They started opening the door at regular intervals, regardless of what the pigeon was doing. The pigeon adapted and expected food at those pre-set times. Then the sly experimenters changed the situation further: They made the times for food delivery random, and slightly longer than usual. As intervals between feedings extended, the poor hungry bird tried various things to get the door to open. When she flapped her wings in a certain way, the door opened. The pigeon didn't know it was random coincidence, so when she wanted food, she flapped her wings in that certain way. Sometimes she got food, sometimes not.

The experimenters called this Pigeon Religion. We may call it primitive or mistaken beliefs about reality. With conflicting emotions, those are the two obscurations that keep us chasing our tail (and flapping our wings) in samsara. We may also call them habits, things we do that seem to make sense in our life, yet may be irrelevant or even worse. When we brush our teeth 21 times per tooth, then we will be safe. When we eat this but not that, our digestion will be safe. When we pray to the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas of yore, our life will be safe. When we practice and exercise daily, our minds and body will be safe. Some of these may be helpful. Some may be spiritual materialism. Some may be Pigeon Religion. Only we can tell, but we have to look.

Recently, I had the privilege of seeing my life through another's eyes, complete with a large and crystal clear mirror that enabled me to see a large quantity of habits, customs, rationalizations, excuses, laziness and other behavior that justified actions which were at least unhelpful, if not destructive. I didn't blame the mirror, and thanked the one who held it. But I didn't like everything I saw.

I saw a lot of Pigeon Religion.

I started to clean up my act. My, my, what a cluttered act! I started with my house. Nearly two years ago I spent months doing little else but cleaning my house: Literally 150 large garbage bags of recycling and garbage went out the door. The house seemed much better. But I was burnt out, so I receded into 'someday I am going to finish cleaning that...' corner, area, basement, attic, shed, living room, office, etc. So now, I started again. No more delays, as if my life were endless.

I started with the house, my environment as a reflection of my mind. Scores of more bags out the door. But it doesn't stop there. Since my friend continued to make comments, graciously given and gratefully received, I continue to see more about my behavior that is just not right. So I look at all my habits, excuses, etc. that do not fit, that I know do not fit yet allow to be part of me, that form the heavy thread of my tightly bound cocoon. They are weighed and measured, examined with mental microscope. Everything is being reevaluated, assessed and is eligible for keeping, for gentle dissection and discard, or for swift action by my vajra vortal sword: *snicker-snack!*

That is how each moment can become fresh. *O frabjous day! Callooh! Callay!*